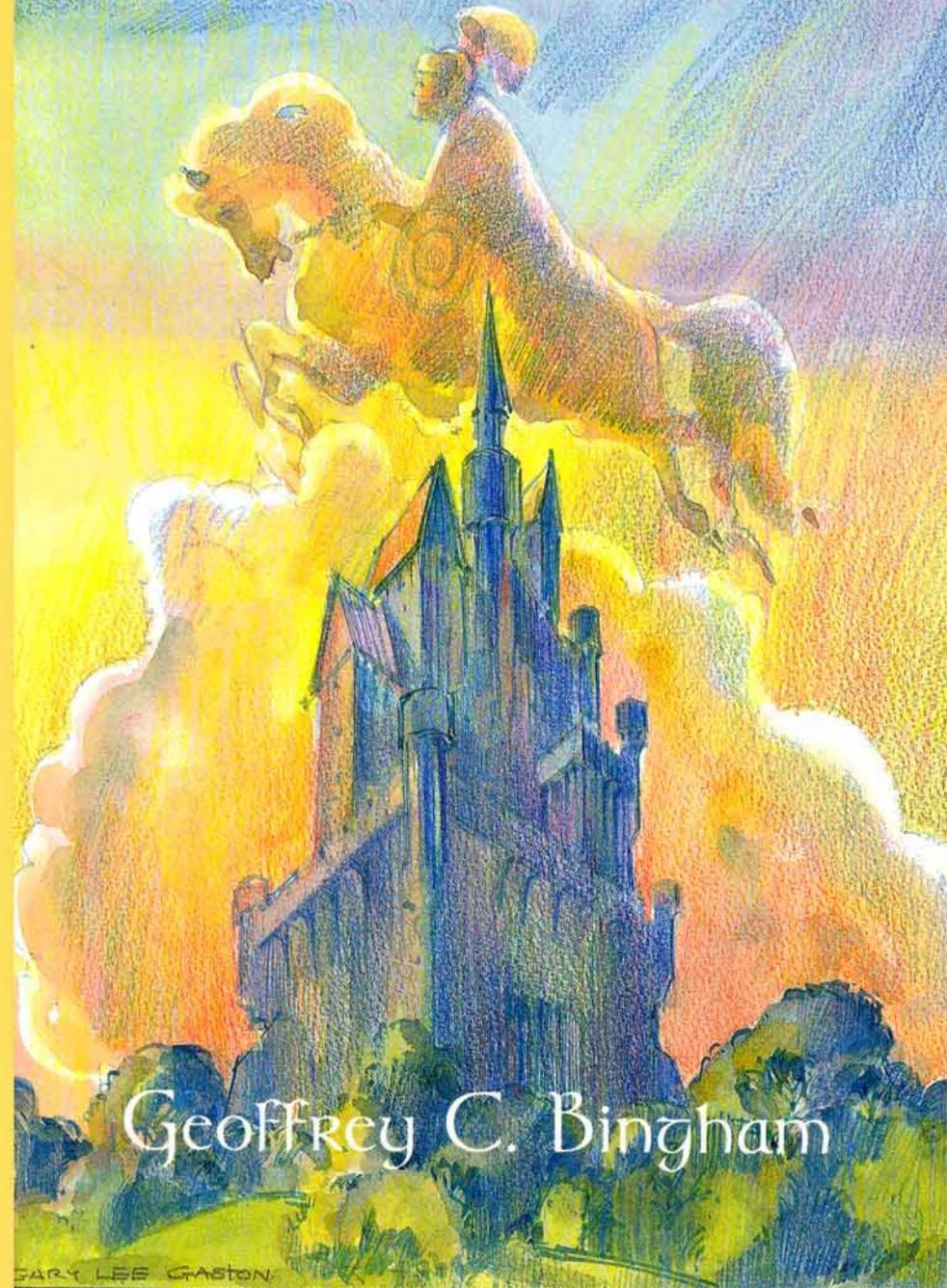


Many readers found the first book of this Trilogy to be gripping, heart-catching. The characters of *Strong as the Sun*, they felt, should not be allowed to disappear. Besides that, the principle of true love—*Agape*—should be proved, and this demanded the sequel, *Beyond Mortal Love*. The same characters are present, but a fascinating—indeed a unique—community reappears in a most dynamic way. The main character of both novels, Prince Balwone, helps to lead this community into acts and deeds which have never been described in any other narrative. This novel captures the medieval charm of a Prince and Princess, but these two do not conform to the general romantic ideas we attach to nobles of old. Gripped by this new kind of love in a pagan world, they suffer for what they believe. Along the way they give us much to think about, and even cause to shiver. Gary Lee Gaston, a well-known Australian painter, has captured the time and mood of the world in which these events take place.

Troubadour Press Inc.

Beyond Mortal Love



Geoffrey C. Bingham

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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Strong as the Sun*

*To Command the Cats
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Beyond Mortal Love

Geoffrey C. Bingham

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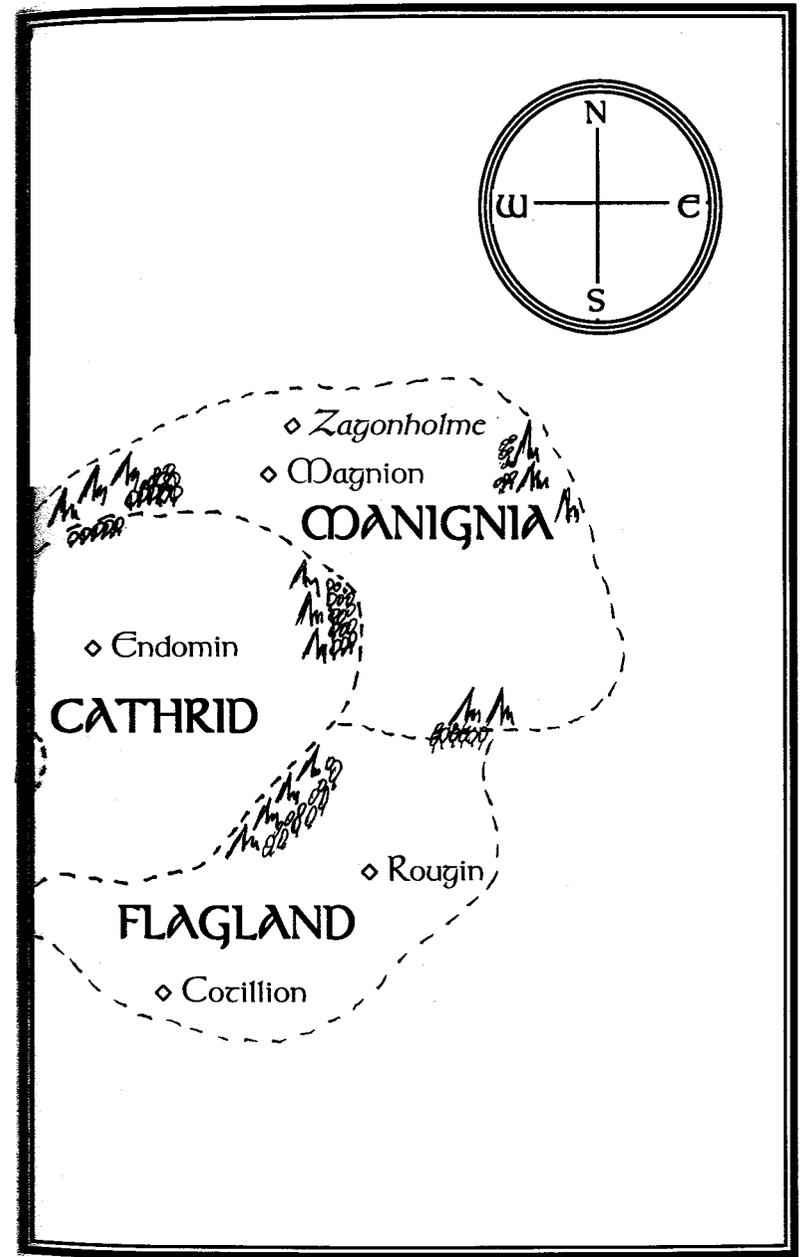
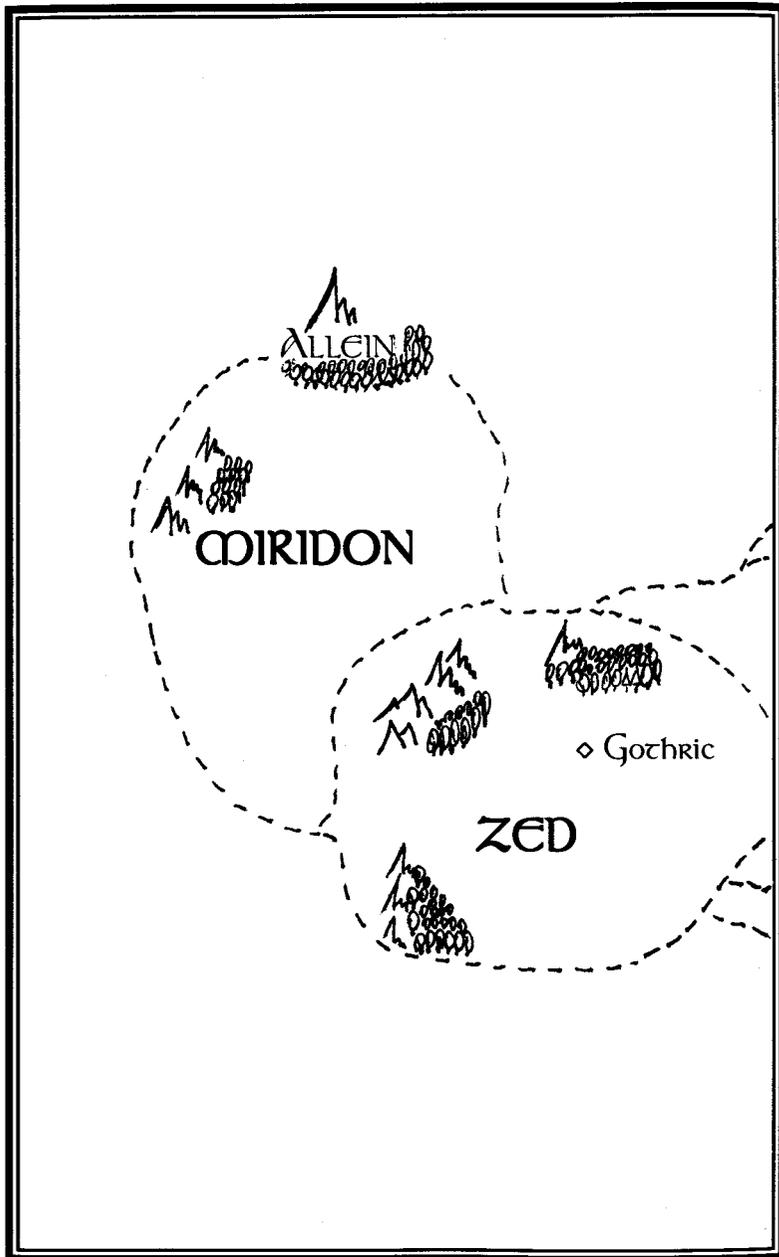
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Foreword

THIS volume, *Beyond Mortal Love*, is the sequel to the novel *Strong as the Sun*. That story, set in a medieval background, sought to show the difference between idealistic love—*Eros*—and authentic love—*Agape*. I was inundated with calls from readers to show how true love acts in practical living, whether medieval or modern. I trust the assessment of selected readers will prove true—‘It is even better than *Strong as the Sun*’; ‘The old characters live and act vividly.’ One kindly critic said, ‘I learn more and more of community in each incident. It is remarkably true to modern life’.



CHAPTER ONE

Beyond Mortal Love

THE TWO men sat on a mossy oak log in a forest glade of the Kingdom of Zed. The time was midafternoon, and the sun from the west was giving light and life to the leaves of the oaks and the elms, and somewhere, nearby, a brook was babbling its way with unsuppressed chuckling.

Beside the two men were two magnificent horses. One was a white stallion of strong and muscled proportions, and the other was no mean steed. Their reins were trailing as they grazed on the grass of the glen, but every so often they would raise their heads and snort, perhaps with impatience at still being bridled, or perhaps to clear their nostrils of the heavy scents and pollen. Prone on the grass was a mastiff, his head between his paws. Occasionally he would lift his head and look with his soft brown eyes towards his master.

The two men heard nothing of the noise of their mounts, and they scarcely looked at the mastiff they loved. They were gazing unseeingly at the grass and flowers beneath them, for their thoughts were in another place. Any comer to that place would have known them to be in great sorrow, and, indeed, from time to time there would be tears and a sighing and coughing that came from deep emotion.

The man of golden hair, soft, ruddy countenance, his fair beard adding strength to his face, was a prince in his own right, Balwone by name, and of the royal family of the couple, Facius and Merphein. Even so, this noble knight was clothed in simple peasant's garb. His patrician features belied his humble clothing, and his eyes, when they were lifted momentarily to gaze at his white stallion Ballia, were of the purest blue, matching the present

sky above. Those eyes, however, were deeply troubled, and there were tear stains on the cheeks of the man.

By contrast, the man with him was a giant of a man, his hair thick and black on a great head. His eyes, when he looked up, were black, but at this moment they were soft, like pools in a dark forest. His body was tensed, and his hands gripped and ungirded each other, so deep was his emotion. It was unusual for a knight to have an esquire attending upon him who was a fully grown man, but this one, Roget, was Balwone's faithful servant and companion.

Both were caught in the passion of sorrow for the destruction, which had happened that very morning, of the village and its people—people known as the Shemgridions. These had had their home in the depths of the royal forests of Zed, the kingdom of one Gothroyd, a man who espoused the ancient gods, and who, in his loyalty, had destroyed the Shemgridions—a gentle tribe of men, women and children who were utterly harmless if not, also, guileless. Their only fault was their simplicity of belief in a personage known as Massia, around whom prophecies were woven, prophecies which promised a love to the world which was beyond what human beings had ever known. This love, it was said, would bring peace to the world.

Gothroyd had rightly discerned that the teaching of Massia was dangerous. He had heard of kingdoms which had embraced this heresy, and their cultures had changed for the worse. They had ceased to invade other kingdoms, and their rulers had become soft, the science of war being abandoned. For this false belief, Gothroyd had destroyed this outcrop of Shemgridions who had unlawfully settled in his forest. Some had fled from the terror and were pursued by the King's soldiers. Some had been recaptured, and the others were still being pursued. Gothroyd feared that if they escaped they would spread the news of the atrocity, and that might bring harm to Zed.

The two men in the glade were late converts to the wisdom of the Shemgridions. So also had been their companion of many years, a wise cobbler named Flamgrid, once an unknown and nameless

orphan babe who had been left at the home of a cobbler, Zemgrid. The cobbler and his wife Femgrid had fostered the boy who grew to be a gifted cobbler, but who, at heart, was a natural scholar, and who had trained the Knight Balwone to be a servant of Massia. Now he was a prisoner of the king in the royal city of Gothric, and the two men in the glade had lost their dearest friend and mentor, the wise and gentle Flamgrid.

The three of them had been present when Gothroyd, the king of Zed, had suddenly appeared in the forest with a band of soldiers. In spite of protests by Prince Balwone, Flamgrid and Roget, the king had destroyed the entire village of houses and people. He had banished Balwone and his esquire from Zed, prohibiting their return. Flamgrid, whom he had admired, he had imprisoned so that he could do no harm in his kingdom. Perhaps, later, the king might allow him back to his forest home where he cobbled and read the ancient manuscripts of accumulated human wisdom.

Balwone had been shocked by the presence of the woman he deeply loved, Gothlic the princess of Zed. She had come with her father and had warned him at the last that destroying the Shemgridions would not stop the plague of their heresy. She had, however, not been in favour of their destruction. After the massacre, Balwone had met her apart from her father and had pledged his love to her. For her part her pledge was more implicit than named. Both had been wholly saddened by the ruthlessness of Gothlic's father, the king.

It was these events, still raw and painful, that the two men contemplated as they were seated on the mossy oak log. They scarcely heard the orchestra of birds and insects that played about them. The beauty of their surroundings made no impact. They meditated in wounded silence.

Ballia the white stallion it was who aroused them. His blowings as he wandered across the glade, head lowered, grazing the grass, turned to whickerings, then to snickerings and finally to a whinnying which awoke them. They started up, as though others were in the glade.

Balwone asked Roget, 'Did you hear voices?'

‘That I did’, said the esquire. ‘It sounded like those of young people.’

Suddenly, out of the forest burst two young people. Balwone recognised them by their dress. They were two wild-eyed Shemgridions in their youth, a young woman and a young man. The old mastiff—Morna by name—ran stiff-legged to them and licked them about the legs and feet.

Balwone looked around to see whether soldiers had pursued them. Then Balwone asked, ‘Have you then escaped the soldiers? Have they followed you?’

They shook their heads. ‘When the killings began we slipped away. We were terrified.’

The knight could see the agony on their faces and, in their eyes, a guilt of sorts for having left the others to die.

‘You did well’, said Balwone gently. ‘There is no sin in escaping.’

They were a trifle reassured, but their fear was evident.

Roget said, ‘We must move quickly, or we will have the soldiers upon us’. It had come to him that he could not now do battle with soldiers, for his new faith seemed to forbid such action.

Balwone grasped Ballia’s reins. ‘Quick!’ he said. ‘Quick to horse!’ He motioned to the young maiden. ‘Ride with Roget my servant.’ To the youth he said, ‘Mount behind me’.

In a flash they were mounted and out of the glade. They cantered along the forest track, listening and looking to see whether they were being pursued. When that was not evident, they dropped to a loping trot. The two horses were well able to bear the double burdens.

As they travelled Balwone spoke aloud. ‘We must be out of Zed as soon as possible, and make our way into Cathrid. From thence we can travel through to Manignia and to our refuge at *Zagonholme*.’

The young Shemgridions looked relieved until Roget ventured an idea.

‘It could be’, he said, ‘that having to journey through Cathrid, we may meet opposition. It may be, sire, that the news of the massacre of the Shemgridions has spread’.

The youth on Balwone’s horse cried out. ‘Then they may be seeking the brethren who live in yon forest, in the Kingdom of Cathrid, for a certainty our own people live there, also.’

Balwone drew reign, listened for a moment for the noises which would indicate pursuit, and, when there were none, he turned slightly in the saddle and asked of the young, ‘Of whom are you? Who are your family?’.

‘I am Shemmosh, son of Shemmah, the son of Shemmaker, and this is my sister Shemmshi.’

Both older men were astonished and delighted.

‘And you hold fast to the faith of your grandfather?’ the knight asked.

‘Of a truth’, said Shemmosh. ‘As did my father and mother, so do we. We were not afraid to die, nor are we, but we deemed it right to survive and tell the faith that is that of all our people.’

Roget’s black eyes gleamed and he shook his head with its shock of black curls and cried, ‘Massia for ever! We must tell all of Massia’s news!’.

‘You say’, said Balwone, ‘that in the forests of Cathrid some of your people live?’.

The youth nodded. ‘It is coming to pass in all forests that our people are making their bid to live. In other kingdoms to the north-west and even in the north-east, the faith of Massia is being accepted. It may be that we should first visit the Shemgridions in Cathrid and then proceed to other kingdoms. It would do your heart good to meet kings and queens and nobles who are of the faith no less than their humble servants.’

Roget was agog with joy. ‘I had thought the Shemgridions were nigh on extinguished’, he said, ‘but now you bring great news’.

Balwone was thinking, and for a time remained silent. Then he slapped his thighs with his strong hands.

‘Doubtless’, he cried, ‘King Gothroyd is privy to these facts, and fears the invasion of Massia’s love. Doubtless, also, he sees it, as told us, as an invasion which will kill the gods and exalt our great Massia’.

He dismounted and bid the others do likewise. ‘Evening is drawing on and I have a fancy that Gothroyd’s soldiers have

explored the forest far enough. Gothroyd, when he considers the matter, will doubtless conclude that news of the destruction of Massia's people will not be a scandal, but a strong sign that Massia cannot take his kingdom or the kingdoms of this vast western continent. It may even be that his cunning plan will allow some to escape for the purposes of reporting his treatment of the Shemgridions.'

Balwone and Roget penetrated the forest and discovered one of the glens they so loved. They opened their baggage and bid Shemmosh and Shemmshi to gather kindling and heavier wood for the fire, whilst Roget and he hacked leafy branches to make a sleeping place for all. In no time they had a fire going. Roget had brought water from a nearby brook and was warming it over the fire. Balwone was cutting small chunks of venison and dropping them into the iron pot along with dried herbs and some salt.

They pulled old logs close to the fire and sat upon them. The silent Shemgridions were staring into the mounting flames, doubtless ruminating on the terrible day that was almost passed. When Balwone handed them platters of venison stew they seemed grateful. They waited for their host to give thanks for the provision of food in a Zed forest, and this Balwone did with great solemnity. They were all grateful for the stimulating cider that seemed to join with the stew to revive their spirits.

'It is best', said Balwone, 'that we do not overly think upon what has happened today, except to believe that Massia will be exalted by it'.

The boy and the girl agreed. Shemmosh said, quietly, 'It is the death that brings the life, and there has been much death this day'.

It seemed no time before the two young people were asleep under a rug Roget had supplied. The dark-eyed man nodded in sympathy towards them.

'It is a living marvel that they are not angry and show no hatred. Such is the power of Massia.'

Balwone nodded. 'Now, Roget, you must sleep. I will awaken you at a latter watch. My mind will not now let me sleep. We must keep alert lest Gothroyd's soldiers come.'

Roget passed quickly into sleep. Balwone waited, for he was sure the dragons would come. If there was the slightest doubt in his conscience, they would come. He knew, now, that evil had its power through the conscience of each human being. Some, it was true, scarcely smelled the strong stench of the foul creatures. Others, like the knight, could see them from time to time. He knew that for all their bellowing and fire and horrible odour, the three sleepers would not even know of their visitation. Ballia would always sense their presence, and even the other steed would show some unease. Often Morna the mastiff would growl, the hackles rising on his neck. This night he seemed to have no stomach for supernatural creatures. Exhausted by the travelling of the day, his stomach filled with the venison stew, he took his rest, inert in the long forest grass.

Even as Ballia tensed, the great dragon was there. Balwone was not moved, but let it send out its stench of brimstone and its fumes of blazing anger, refusing to be impressed.

The shining, scaly creature arched over him, bending forward from its great height. It bellowed accusation after accusation, but this time it found no place of response in the spirit of the Manignian prince.

'You are the one who is responsible for the death of these simple people!' screeched the reptile. 'You brought destruction upon them—you the great lover! Lover? Pah! Weak creature, unable to put Gothroyd and his enemies to flight! Where, now, is your famous golden sword? Where is your victory! All of it a chimera; a fake.'

Balwone was staring into the fire, countering each accusation with the truths that Shemmaker had taught him the previous night. In all this he was unmoved until the dragon mentioned the golden sword. At that point it seemed that even Ballia started, and his head went up with a wild whinny. The knight knew this sound would not be heard by the sleepers, and so he did not worry. He and Ballia were one in their understanding, and Balwone, in quiet curiosity of spirit, felt for where the golden sword had once been.

To his amazement and quiet delight his hand felt it at his side. The thought came to him, bringing even richer pleasure, that this

was, indeed, the sword, not of Balwone, but of Massia. For his own purposes Massia had given it into his hand. Doubtless it would come, and doubtless it would go, all at the wish and whim of Massia.

The thought brought him a great sense of power, though not of the kind possessed by Gothroyd when he slew the gentle Shemgridions. It was, he believed, the power of love. With such love, he thought, a man can slay dragons and giants alike.

He stood and drew the sword from its scabbard. In the light of the fire he shook it towards the beast. He swung it so that the golden metal glittered in the sweep of his arm. It was impossible for the dragon not to see it.

He took steps towards the fiery brute and cried, 'The sword of Massia and the love of his kingdom!'

The effect on the dragon was remarkable. Its eyes dulled to a look of fear. Its flames ceased to be and only a faint spiral of smoke remained, and that as in a drift of a dying breeze. The body shivered with tremors and convolutions of a minor kind, as though it were about to die. The enormous body began to sag, and then, without one utterance, it faded to nothing.

All was still. Even the forest gave forth no night cries. Only Ballia was awake and he shook his head and mane as he walked towards his master. His eyes glowed against his white body, turning to an opalescent red. He nodded his head as though speaking. He whickered with ecstasy and rubbed his soft nose on the neck of the prince.

Balwone rubbed the nose of his favourite creature, and then put his arms around its neck. At that moment he realised he missed his beloved mastiff Morna, and wondered where he was.

So full was his heart that he began to sing one of those songs which came only as he was wont to sing when filled with Massia's joy and power.

*Ah, loving Massia, Prince of the faithful,
Lord of the Universe, Lord of all love,
Bow we in wonder, knowing your splendour,
Knowing the glory you send from above.*

*Weak are we mortals, weak in our living,
Weak in our loving, weak in our giving.
You are the loving one, strong in the giving,
Making us giving and living in love.*

*Dragons accuse us, mocking our weakness,
Mocking our sinfulness, mocking our shame.
You are the Massia bringing our living
To live in that loving beyond mortal pain.*

*Beyond mortal loving there is a rich living
That comes from the love that your loving has brought.
Giants and dragons flee from before it,
And demons and devils fear its onslaught.*

*Sword that is golden is sword that is gentle,
Smiting the evil, and righting the good.
Massia! Massia! Oh, how we love you,
In loving you wholly as we mortals should.*

It was a scene of quiet beauty, the man singing from the depths of his spirit, yet not waking the sleeping maiden and her brother, nor even Roget. The air was pure in the forest and no element of dragon-stench remained. The flames of the fire flickered just enough to show the great forest giants and trees as they reared heavenwards, and the silence began to be invaded by the customary night singers, nocturnal birds. The man was standing with the horse, and now the other steed was as alert to the beauty of it all as Ballia and Balwone.

Then the flames lowered until they were one with the coals. A light chill came on the air. Ballia plodded towards his companion, and Roget woke and rubbed his eyes, knowing it was time for his watch.

CHAPTER TWO

A Quiet Journey to the Place of the Shemgridions

DAWN saw the foursome gone from their glade. Balwone and Roget woke the brother and sister long before dawn, giving them a hot cup of sweet herbal fluid and a large morsel of spiced unleavened bread. They bathed their hands and faces in the cold water of the brook, and were soon astride the two steeds. The older couple had effaced traces of their overnight camp, and the party made its way along the forest track, their mounts astute enough to know the path; the mastiff Morna trotting patiently, sometimes ahead, sometimes at their side, sometimes in the rear.

It was well after sun-up when they entered into Cathrid territory. Once midmorning, they stopped in a hidden grove for a rest and cider and breakfast bread. Cathrid seemed to have a more lightened forest, probably because some of the trees had been harvested, and so more light from the sun penetrated, and grasses and wild flowers were like a carpet underfoot. For the most part they kept to the natural forest path, always alert to hear sounds of human beings. By this time they had concluded they were not being pursued from Zed, but they wondered about the inhabitants of Cathrid.

The two young people were sore in their spirits. Whilst their faith in Massia had not wavered, their personal grief of love had increased. The pain was increasing as the numbness dissolved. From time to time both young people wept, and their fellow travellers did not chide them, nor even seek to cheer them. Grieve they must, but in their grief was no anger, a fact which the older men realised, and for which they were glad.

Towards evening they made camp, Roget setting up the fire, and the soft underlay of leaves nearby ready for the night's sleeping. Balwone disappeared, followed by Morna, and later the two arrived back with a hare's carcass. He had skinned and cleansed the animal of its innards, the bulk of which the mastiff devoured, his master having first selected a few organs to give taste to the stew. The knight and Roget chatted, discussing the spices and herbs they would use, and the young couple were immensely cheered by the savoury aroma. Roget made flat bread in the hot coals, and Balwone stirred a brew of herbal fluid. There were no logs in this glen, so they used the turf for a table. Around them they heard the sounds of small animals which had been drawn by the attractive odour of the cooking. The night was drawing in, and with it the forest coolness increased. Even so, they sat, their stomachs filled, their minds busy and their voices chattering above the sounds of the woods.

Balwone asked Shemmosh if he knew how close they might be to the village of the Shemgridions, but the youth shook his head.

'I have never travelled this way', he said. 'Only our elders would do this.'

The two men seemed to show no special interest in their young charges, but they were, in fact, watching them closely, observing their grief, but pleased by the self-control they saw. They deemed it unwise to open the subject of yesterday's massacre, but marvelled at the peace the boy and girl seemed to have, even in the depths of their grief.

Balwone ventured only one observation. 'True grief is part of true love and we must be free to grieve.'

They nodded, seeming grateful for this understanding.

Later in the evening Shemmosh spoke suddenly, 'I would like to grow up to be like my father. I would like to be a wise elder'.

His sister nodded her agreement. Roget clapped his hands and said, 'It is wise men we need in these sad days'. Doubtless his mind was going back over his own life, but he seemed not to be distraught.

It was three days before they reached the band of Shemgridions who lived in one of the Cathrid forests. On the way they kept

clear of meeting folk, but Shemmosh seemed to recognise a passer-by. It was not that the man wore Shemgridion garb, but, when he saw Shemmosh, he looked startled and would have made off at a great pace, but Shemmosh ran after him and held him firmly. The man was of slight build or that would not have been possible. Balwone supported the youth who was asking the man where his people dwelt.

The man seemed too embarrassed to answer, but Balwone insisted.

Shemmosh said, 'This is one of our people, but it seems he has forsaken the faith. He has thrown away his Shemgridion apparel and will not say why'.

Balwone confronted him sternly. The man must have recognised that he was a person of importance for he answered.

'Master', he said, 'it is dangerous in Cathrid to be a follower of Massia. It is said that Massia wishes to have world domination, and that all races must come under his rule. Many races object to such domination, and we have reason to think we may be attacked shortly. You must let me go. I have abandoned the old faith. Here the gods and the idols are very powerful'.

'What you do is your own business', the knight said, 'but we want news of where the people of Massia are now living. That you must tell us'.

'It is difficult, sire', the man said. 'If it is discovered that I told you, then both the people of Cathrid and the people of Massia will be angry with me.'

Unconsciously Balwone's hand was feeling at his left side, where often the golden sword and its scabbard had strapped themselves. Now, seemingly without reason, the sword was there. Fear filled the eyes of the stranger.

'Let be, stranger', Balwone said. 'I will not harm you. I will be angered if you do not give me this information, so listen to my plea.'

He turned and pointed to Shemmosh and Shemmshi.

'These two', he said, 'have come from Zed. Some days ago their whole community was destroyed by Gothroyd the king. It may be that they only have escaped. They needs must meet their friends and be joined to that community. Will you not have

enough pity to direct us to the place? If you will not, then will they suffer? Why, man, they have seen their parents killed before their eyes. We also witnessed the same, and our hearts ache for these children'.

The apostate Shemgridion flushed with guilt and shame, and also trembled from fear.

'Master', he said, 'I will tell you. If you will protect me, I will go with you. Truth is, I have had no peace since I turned my back on Massia. My heart is heavy and my spirit dull'.

Balwone did not comment. 'By what name, then, shall we call you?'

Again the blushing and the trembling. 'I have told others that my name is Gildad, for that is a common enough name in Cathrid, but my true name is Shemmapath. The "Shemm" is present in most of our names and it denotes our nation. Please call me Shemmapath.' By this time tears had come to his eyes.

The knight nodded gravely. He touched the man's arm. 'Have no fear Shemmapath. Your restoration will come. We have powers which bring only good things to pass.' Even as he said that, he thought of the massacre which he and Roget had brought to Shemgridions in Zed.

It was a day's journey into the heart of the forest, and the band were grateful for the leadership of the stranger. At times he would look down at his garb and then to the clothes of the youths, the type which he had once discarded, and he seemed pained and sorrowful.

Their mode of travel was that the horses should not be burdened by more than two riders each. For that reason the men often changed places. Sometimes Balwone or Roget would walk, and on one occasion Balwone conversed with the renegade Shemgridion.

'Friend', he said, 'do you think you might rejoin your brethren? What will you say to them when we arrive?'

Tears filled the eyes of the guide. 'If they will receive me back, I will gladly be one with them. I thought I would have a freedom such as I had never enjoyed if I were to leave them. I

would have days of joy in doing as I wished and in being free from all restraints. I have discovered that that is an unobtainable dream. I wot that in this world we will always have certain bonds, and for that matter, certain bounds also. I only pray they will receive and restore. My heart's desire is that way.'

Balwone comforted him with the assurance that they would receive him, forgiving him his rejection of them.

He asked, 'What, then, did you think of Massia that you could leave him?'

'Ah!' said the man with a great sigh. 'One may leave Massia but he never leaves anyone. Always he is present everywhere, and one can only have misery in his presence when one refuses his joy, as I have done.' Tears came into his eyes, and he gulped and then coughed.

They walked in silence until it was the stranger's turn to ride on Ballia. Balwone walked on, having time to talk with Shemmshi.

'Is your heart healing?' he asked gently as a father would under such circumstances.

'My heart is not broken', she said. 'My father was a gentle person, though also firm in many ways. I am proud of the way he died. I am just sad for my people.'

'It is right to be sad', the Manig prince said. 'In your case you will live to see much fruit from your father's death.'

She nodded, though a trifle sadly. 'Massia also once died so he has set us an example.' A shadow passed over her face, and then it was lit with joy. 'My brother told me that you said there is no true life which does not come out of death, and that comforted me.'

Balwone looked down at the forest path, not wanting to add more to what she had said. It seemed that something arose from that path and slipped into his spirit. When he looked up Roget was there with a smile on his face.

'Master', he said happily, 'we are going to see our people. We will all have joy together.'

The knight returned the smile. 'Let us pray that no disaster comes to them because of us. Other than that, it cannot but be joy.'

What had slipped into him was the same warm anticipation of joining the people of Massia. When his hand strayed towards his left hip it was unconsciously to feel the sword, a sort of omen of good and of security.

They moved off, continuing down the path. Shemmapath desired to walk, as though, somehow, that might atone for his failure. He had a sense both of joy and sorrow as he thought on the outcome of his forced return.

Somehow they had come into a land of good light and beautiful noises. Large birds of black and white feathering gave high, fluted cries from the tops of the tall trees. Others seem to rival them with their carolling. Somewhere a bird came as close to human laughter as they had ever heard, and it was joined by a circle of friends who increased the joy. It was, too, the time of flowers, and there were masses of bluebells and golden buttercups, all shivering and dancing in the gentle breezes which rippled the long, feathery grass as though some unseen being was passing through. The mounts seemed to revive to fresh life, and even the old mastiff became as a young hound.

A cry was wrung from Shemmapath. 'We are near', he said. 'We are near to the home of the Shemgridions. It is but a furlong away, just deeper into the heart of the forest, but away somewhat from this track.'

Their hearts had been lightened with the glow and beauty of the day, and their conversation was now even more lively, being animated by their nearness to the camp of the Massia people. Balwone felt the excitement as he sensed something that was to happen, something that would involve him. It was at that point he unaccountably remembered the ancient musical instrument which had belonged to the famous Shemgridion musician and vocalist, Nappali. Balwone stopped the white stallion and withdrew from the large leather saddlebag the instrument of joy and power. With no little awe and excitement he uncovered it from its cloth wrappings.

He first looked at the source of music which he had once called 'quaint', but which now, so to speak, was a being in itself. Using his nails as a plectrum, he drew a few notes.

The effect on the Shemgridion children was dramatic. They cried out involuntarily, for the implement of song was near to a legend among their people. Not only was it ancient, but it was also unique. No one had been able to copy it effectively. The young couple had assumed the Zed soldiers had destroyed it, and now, here in Balwone's hand, it was present. Their looks were of delight and awe mixed. They trembled somewhat, wondering what triumph or tragedy might now be born.

Shemmosh said, 'There is no other like this one. I have often dreamed of playing it, but that would never have been possible. Nappali alone has ever played it'.

When Balwone proffered it to the boy, he shrank back. 'It is only given to a special one to play it', he said. 'Other music I play, but this is not yet for me. It is only for the truly wise.'

Balwone sat on the grass at the side of the path and held it affectionately. He was no player of instruments, but this one seemed to have been made for him. He drew his hands across the strings, as one does with a harp, and the thing in his hands was like a creature as it gave forth its wonderful sounds. Almost in spite of himself a tune began to throb, and before the knight could prevent so doing, he gave voice to all that was within him. It was like the sword at his side—something which had a life of its own—and Balwone's words formed a poem ere he knew it.

Sweet Massia, heart of the Most High,
You bid us children to your bosom fly.
No home is there where we may rest,
But in the haven of your loving breast.

How pained we are to see our loved ones' death,
How sorrowed when they lose their mortal breath,
Yet to us all you give that healing love,
Till we are one, below, above.

You give us, too, all power to truly love,
That our humanity might gladly prove
That death is nothing, life is ever all,
Whose hearts respond to your high call.

Now let us live that life unto the full,
Who now learn wisdom in Massia's school.
One day we'll see you, fully, face to face,
With all our beings give you rich praise.

Shemmosh and Shemmshi stared with shining eyes, and even Shemmapath stood tall and firm as not before. Roget was clapping his hands at the bright new tune the strings of music gave, and Balwone was trembling with wonder. Never: never before had he created a song quite like this one—to the music of the instrument, and he felt some other hand had played whilst his heart gave forth the words. He admitted the words were ordinary—perhaps even doggerel—but he felt they might bring healing to the orphaned children, and it sent his mind back to the pathetic creatures of the forests of Allein in Miridon. Had his love been of this pure strain, he might better have helped them.

For the moment all dragons were silenced, and all giants rendered harmless. Demons and dread creatures cravenly sought hiding places. Within Balwone's heart a great trumpet rang out, and this was for the pilgrims as they plunged into the darker portion of the forest which would lead them to the Cathrid home of the people of Massia.

Roget, in spite of his great bulk as a man, was as a child, trembling with joy. His experience of the Shemgridions of Zed was for him unforgettable. In the hours he had spent with them, his life had changed sharply and thoroughly. Shemmapath was somewhat apprehensive, but Balwone also detected a great joy. The man was coming home, and the foolishness of his temporary freedom he now impatiently rejected. The two children who had dismounted were ecstatic in their joy, constantly hugging one another whilst yet murmuring, over and over, their delight. Balwone thought he could detect the tune and words of the song he had just sung. Ballia the stallion and its gelding companion were stepping high, as though in some ceremonial display. Morna, as before, seemed so refreshed as to be a renewed hound.

As for Balwone, he was filled both with pleasure and pain: pleasure for the meeting to come, yet pain lest his coming should bring tragedy to the village.

In this way the little band made its way to the village of the Shemgridions.

CHAPTER THREE

A New Venture with Massia's Shemgridions

THE VILLAGE was fenced around with a high wall of slim, woven saplings. These were to prevent animal marauders of the night, but would not have been proof against human ones. The timbered gates were opened as the small band arrived. The elders had been gathered together in some sort of a parley, and with grave faces approached Balwone and his friends.

There was but an admiring glance at the horses before they caught sight of the young brother and sister. The elders embraced them warmly and with joy, but their faces resumed their former gravity. They addressed the children.

'News has come to us of the killing of our brethren, of mothers and fathers, and we are sad for you.'

Seeing Balwone's surprise, the chief elder said, 'Three young folk escaped and came directly here, for they know this place and have grandparents who live here'.

He looked at Balwone. 'And who, sire, may you be?'

'I am Balwone, a citizen of Manignia, son of Facius and Merphein. I am on pilgrimage, as also is my esquire Roget.'

The elders nodded, for they had heard of the exploits of Balwone, Flamgrid and Roget. Strangely enough, they had also heard of Facius and Merphein.

The knight then indicated Shemmapath, who stood pale and silent before the elders who knew him.

'This man is a penitent', he said gently. 'He wishes to be restored to your community, having realised the foolishness of his ways. He was kind to us, leading us to your place.'

The elders bowed slightly and called him across to their group where he stood looking timid and tired.

The chief elder then addressed the prince, 'I am Shemmashin, chief elder of our community, and these are my fellow elders. We have heard of you Balwone and your exploits at the Holy Mountain. We know, too, of Roget and your presence at the village of our brethren in Zed'.

Balwone made a gesture, as though he would speak, but Shemmashin held up his hand.

'It was not your presence with our people which caused their death', he said. 'The kings of this region have long feared us, though we are but a simple people. They fear for their gods and idols, for their trust is in them. Later we will talk about these things. Meanwhile, we are grateful to you for bringing to us the two children. It is doubtless a sign of your love for us, if not indeed for Massia.'

Balwone bowed slightly. 'Of a truth I love Massia. I love him beyond all others.' Remembrance of Gothic came to his mind, but he knew his love for Massia was beyond that for her, or perhaps it was other than he had for Massia.

There was a murmur of approval from the group of elders, and in a moment there was an embracing, some laughter and clear evidences of joy. They moved towards the centre of the village, and as they proceeded, so folk did spill out of their wattle and daub homes which were little more than large huts, built in similar fashion to those of the Shemgridions in the forest of Zed. They all made towards the central point. On the eastern side—as had been in the other village—there was a meeting house, but the assembly did not enter into this. Some of the community had been working at roughly hewn timber tables, some at grinding flour from grain, whilst others were pursuing crafts. All left their work and joined the small crowd which was grouped in a semi-circle, the elders and newly arrived visitors facing them, but apart from them.

Roget stood, the reins of both mounts in his hands, and the hound, Morna, settled at that man's feet.

Three young persons, about the ages of Shemmosh and Shemmshi, being those who had escaped the massacre of Zed,

came out of the gathering. They first bowed to Balwone and Roget, and then rushed to their two friends, embracing them. There was much sobbing, as also much joy. A grey-haired, motherly woman led them away for solace and food. There was a faint sigh from the crowd, and a soft murmuring, but this died when the elder began his address.

'Prince Balwone and Esquire Roget, we are grateful for the service you have done our people and for your evident love for us which we understand to arise from Massia's love for you. We bid you welcome, and offer you humble hospitality. What will come of your coming we do not know, but we assume it is all of the will of the Most High.

'We have much to share with you and would taste of your wisdom, as we trust you will taste of ours. You, Roget and your beasts must be greatly wearied from the events of the past days, and we bid you take rest. Tonight in the presence of the Most High we will have worship, and ponder the wisdom and love of our Lord Massia.'

The two men were led to a hut which must have been provided for visitors. A man led away the two mounts to care for them, and Morna trotted behind his master's heels, finding a place outside the hut where he stretched out trustingly to guard his beloved lord.

Although it was early in the day, Balwone and Roget stretched out on the pile of rushes and were soon asleep. Even at midday, the time of eating, their hosts did not disturb them. It was not until late afternoon that the two men awoke, and went to the forest stream to bathe and be refreshed. Even then they were not visited by Shemmashin and the other elders. At the time of the evening meal when savoury smells were in the air, Shemmashin and his elders came to conduct them to the meal.

Over the meal, Shemmashin and Balwone talked about the massacre of Zed. This was a phrase which would be indelible in their memory, 'the Massacre of Zed'. After the meal the worship was to take place, but Balwone noted it was not just a regular ritual to be enacted, not a contractual obligation to the Most High. It rose out of the warmth of friendship that was there in the community. He let his gaze rove around the eating hall. There

was joy, thoughtfulness, and, here and there, knitted brows as some pursued lines of thought that had come to them. He noted that the young folk of Zed were sitting with older folk. There did not seem to be tables set aside just for young people. The scene was really a family one. Certainly there was a hum of pleasure, and the knight realised that human enjoyment was the essence of their community.

When Shemmashin rose to speak, a silence gradually spread until all were listening to the old man.

'It is our time for coming to the Most High through his Massia and the Spirit of them both', he said. Balwone was somewhat puzzled by the man's statement, but he flowed with the mind of the leader. The elder turned towards Balwone, indicating him with a hand.

'We have here one who has read the manuscripts of the ancients, and who has gathered much wisdom. When we have moved fully into the spirit of worship, we will see whether the Most High would have his servant divulge to us some of that distilled wisdom.'

He bowed slightly to Balwone, and continued. 'We have with us some of our brethren from Zed, who have had sad happenings in their lives, but their faith in Massia remains strong. Tonight we will pray for them, and for those who have gone to be with Lord Massia, and in the days following you will help to heal them with your love.'

There was a murmur of assent, and then, at the bidding of Shemmashin, they rose and spontaneously broke into singing. The Shemgridions sang in the language which was native to them, but Balwone and Roget were stirred by it, as though they understood the substance of what was being sung. They knew not the language, but still caught the various notes as the music rose and fell, as it became plaintive and sad, as it flourished into fullness and was pure praise to the Most High. Balwone felt the urge to go to his hut and bring back the instrument of the singer, Nappali. This he did, and no one seemed to notice his going. When he returned he laid the instrument on the bench by his side.

When they prayed, some had the two visitors in mind and they prayed in the lingua franca, the trade language of the northern

kingdoms, so that Roget and Balwone could catch the drift of their utterances.

Finally it all died to a whisper, and then there was a gentle, yet living silence.

Impulsively, Balwone picked up the instrument, and had it in his hands whilst he talked to the people. He told them of the sage Flamgrid, and of Facius his gentle father, and Merphein his beautiful mother. He told of reading the wisdom of the ancients, and of his belief that he had been called to bring love to the world.

When he said this there was a sigh, a warm hum of assent, a quiet nodding of heads; but his heart beat faster as he began to reveal the perfidy of his spirit in thinking he could do what only Massia could do. He told them clearly of his ignorance and of the battles with giants and dragons and seducing creatures as he toiled towards the Holy Mountain. For some moments he back-tracked to the days when he was doing his apprenticeship out in the world, and viewing human wisdom and human nature in all its good and all its evil. From time to time his voice broke, even with the simple remembrances of those years.

Then he returned to the wonder of the Holy Mountain and the sight of the man seated upon a golden egg from which was to be hatched the secret of love, and which had power to transform the world of humanity and bring all things together in one.

He could hear dissenting notes as spontaneous utterance of disagreement came from some in his audience. Even so, he pressed on, telling them of his inner anger at the man who would have hatched the golden egg of love. At certain points in his narrative his voice broke, and tears seem to pour over his hot heart, and even to spring from his eyes.

'Perfidy! Perfidy! Perfidy!' he was crying to himself, and the audience heard the humility of self-reproach in his voice and they ceased their murmuring. Now they were with him, sensing that here, indeed, was a true penitent.

As his story rose to a climax, so did his voice, and there was even a certain wildness in his manner of telling. He concealed nothing, and as he told of the depraved drive of his own heart in slaying the prince who sat upon the golden egg, there was a

sobbing in the midst. Not only women wept, but also some of the men.

At the point where he was describing the slaying of the gracious Man of the Egg, he was choked in voice so that he could scarcely articulate, but he pressed on and told the terrible deed, describing how he looked into the eyes of the dying man and saw them to be his own.

The sobbing of his hearers did not cease, but a great sigh of sorrow swept across all, as though they had witnessed the most tragic of acts, perhaps the most terrible of all, save the killing of Massia.

Balwone felt he could not describe the horror that had come to him or the dreadful serpentine creature that had emerged from the cracked egg, and the degradation and the evil which had confronted him, not only in sight, but also in the depths of his own being. Scarcely conscious he was doing it, he swept up Nappali's medium of music and began to sing out of the depths of his heart, broken once again by the memory of his perfidy. No one but Roget knew that he was untrained in the use of the instrument and that his apt use of it was little short of a miracle.

As he sang in the language they could understand, the lingua franca of the kingdoms, it seemed that he drew in words he had never known, and phrases and ideas that surprised him as he sang, but such never impeded the flow of his feelings. It seemed to the wondering Roget that he was Nappali the Singer, for although the voice was different—it was actually the true voice of Balwone—yet the history and the wisdom and the thought was as that of Nappali. Roget shook his head and the tears dripped down his nose and his chin.

The folk who watched were in no illusion. They knew this man to be one of themselves, one of the ancient tribes from which they had come, and possibly in which Balwone's ancestors had once had their roots. Nothing false emanated from the singer, and they thought that this one had come in Nappali's place, with Nappali's music and Nappali's message.

They had been standing all the time of the worship and the words of the prince. Only the aged had seated themselves on the benches, but even they, from time to time, would rise, and their

hands would be uplifted in worship. New life, it seemed, surged even into them. As for the whole audience, it was transfixed by the words of the noble visitor.

Balwone sang the song of his spiritual pilgrimage, and then told of the assent of his beloved teacher, the cobbler Flamgrid. He spoke of their going into the forest of Zed to find the people of Massia and speak with them, and listen to their teaching. He spoke of Shemmaker and the elders and all the people, and their time of worship when Nappali had sung as he had thought no man had ever thus sung. He was unaware, at this point, that the mantle of Nappali had fallen on him, though there was wonderment in his spirit that he could play the musical instrument so fluently, and that he could sing songs he had never heard, and convey the truth in words he had never rehearsed.

The message of his singing at the last was the need to speak of Massia throughout the world, and he spoke of a calling and a command for him to do this. Roget's eyes shone in all their blackness as he believed he would be his master's esquire to the ends of the earth. The Cathrid Shemgridions were caught up in his passion and they were exclaiming their assent in words he could not hear, but he was encouraged by their evident accord with him.

Then the wave, which had lifted up in a wonderful surge, now expended itself, as it were, on the shore of the people within the meeting house. His instrument fell silent and so did he. He stood holding it before him, hands drooped but clutching it, whilst his spirit remained soaring, the wonderful thoughts floating and swirling about him, and his future sealed in and by the prophetic words of his own mouth.

Around him the people were speaking in low voices, and it was as though they could not contain the inspiration within them. Shemmashin raised his hands. His eyes were shining, and then he lifted up his voice, and began a sweet chant in which all joined. Some of the words Balwone could catch, and some of them, not. The voice of the assembly was one, so that in unity it flowed. Balwone could sense they were repeating many of the things he had said, and he sensed they were affirming them.

What relieved him most of all was that they understood the dreadful act he had executed, but knew, too, that he had had a death to his own evil self in the hours and days that followed, and that he understood the deep grace of the Most High in transforming his creature and making him into a servant of Massia. He finally seated himself on the bench and listened to the waves of rich worship that flowed about him. In some way he knew Massia was present, but it was not a presence the eye could see or the ear hear. Nor, he thought, was it imagined. It was just that Massia was present, and Balwone rested in this peaceful assurance.

For his part, Roget was one with the community. He moved around, as some of them were moving, articulating his love for them all, and for Massia their Lord. Finally the sounds of worship died to a whisper, and then there was silence. Shemmashin did not give any direction to the families. The hour was not late so far as the night was concerned, but the folk drifted out, moving towards their huts or seating themselves in groups around the tables on which they worked during the day.

Balwone went to the door to see what was happening. There were lights here and there, wicks fluttering like wings of flame in flat pottery saucers of oil, and the scene to his eyes was most beautiful. He knew no dragon or errant giant could abide all this joy and peace, and he revelled in the love that flowed through the community. In some huts singing was continuing. He wondered for a moment with a sense of sadness whether the outcome of the night would be another evil massacre, but something assured him, in his spirit, that this would not be so. He clung to that fine thought, and continued to see the light of the moon washing over the village, soft silver on the roofs, and on the compound and its inhabitants. The stars were faint because of the moon, but the pinpoints of light were there. He felt the peace of it move over him, until the voice of Shemmashin spoke to him,

‘We have much to discuss’, the elder said. ‘Let us be seated again and talk of these things.’

CHAPTER FOUR

Balwone and Shemmashin Share the Universal Lordship of Massia

SHEMMASHIN stared thoughtfully at Balwone. They were seated opposite one another, on benches, and leaning forward on the rough-hewn table.

‘You are undoubtedly the prophet of Massia’, he said, and both men knew his statement was no light one. Balwone felt a faint shiver in his flesh. Even so, he said nothing. He waited on the chief elder of the Shemgridions.

‘I have heard your story this night’, said the other man, ‘but I had heard of you before as a disciple of Flamgrid. That which I heard did not lead me to think of you as other than a disciple of a famous sage. We knew Flamgrid had been born of our nation, but not that he had yet come to be the disciple of Massia himself. I had no reason to think of you as a prophet of Massia, or, should I say, *the* prophet of Massia for our age’.

He looked directly at Balwone who could not take his eyes off this old man. That the elder thought of him, as *a* prophet, he could understand, but as *the* prophet—that was something the knight would have to absorb. Yet, even as he began to ponder the idea, there came a rush of memories and the belief of Flamgrid, Facius and Merphein that he was God’s chosen one to do a task which—he had later seen—only Massia could accomplish. He was trying to sort out his ideas when the elder again spoke.

‘Your idea that you, of yourself, could bring love to the world was a mistaken notion. Indeed, it was the most dangerous of all, since you then did not know what is true love. Even so, your

sense of calling was correct. God had called you, and he had prepared you, but the golden egg on the Holy Mountain could never have hatched out and brought love to this world.'

Balwone nodded. 'I have come to realise that what you say is most certainly true. Even so, I have puzzled over it all. Did the Most High plan it thus, or was it the misplaced wisdom of our humanity?'

'Both', said the elder. 'The human race is ever seeking to reach the highest pinnacle of attainment. Our history is filled with such tales of human pride. The sages in every age have warned of that danger.'

'If it was so wrong', said the knight, puzzled, 'why then did the dragons and the giants seek to prevent me from reaching the Holy Mountain?'

'There is nought that is evil in the Holy Mountain', said Shemmashin. 'It is using the Holy Mountain for pride that is wrong, but the dragons and giants are of our own making. They are our evil become formed by us, our images given life, for the human spirit is ever in conflict within itself. Terrible forms of evil run riot within us.'

Gradually Balwone was coming to understand the nature of his pilgrimage.

'Why, then, did Massia and the Most High allow this venture of mine?'

The grey eyes of the old man bored into Balwone's mind. 'Sometimes such things must happen before we can be released from that strange pride within us—pride that is so dangerous. Do not ask *why* it happened, for such converse with the Most High lacks true humility. Simply ask *how* a man can live in such deceits, and thus answer your question by acknowledging our inbred evil.'

The knight saw the simplicity of the advice. As he did a serenity quietly pervaded his mind. He motioned his head in agreement. In the future he would never ask questions about his past.

'This is where you are now', said Shemmashin, as though reading his mind. 'I have better things of which to speak. I look to your prophetic calling and I would ask information from you.'

'To this moment', said Balwone, 'I had not thought of myself as a prophet, but the days with the community in Zed, and now with you, both help me to understand something of my calling. Like Flamgrid, I have always sought wisdom and have desired to serve the Most High. What, then, can I tell one who is far ahead of me in the knowledge of Massia?'

The elder shook his head. 'It is not on this wise', he said. 'It is the will of the Most High to give us different callings. Mine is that of an elder, yours that of a prophet. I must always remain in the midst of my people. You must ever be moving from place to place. Your case is different.'

'Then ask', said Balwone, 'though I know not whether I can answer or not'.

'Firstly, I ask what you think of our companies, the one in Zed which was martyred, and the one which is here? What comes to your mind as you see us?'

Balwone was puzzled until he understood the heart of the elder's question. Then he answered slowly.

'I have, forsooth, been thinking, though without much understanding in my mind. I keep wondering why you stay as one community in a forest, not seeing the world, when Massia would have us tell that world about his great love.'

The elder nodded, as though the question were valid.

'I also wonder', said the knight, 'why it is you all wear the same garb. It would seem to separate you from your fellow humans, and distinguish you from them, when Massia's love bids us be with others, and even as others'.

The elder again bowed his assent with the lowering of his head.

'I wonder', said Balwone, 'that you do not seek audience with the princes of these kingdoms, seeking to persuade them of the truth which would change the nature of life within their royal realms'.

Shemmashin gave him a quiet look. 'Your questions are wise ones', he said, 'and we must ponder them. For the moment I only have answers in part. As for our garb: it tells the world we are Massia's people. This no other garb could do. As for speaking to kings and governors: we have often tried, but with little

success. We have thought to be ready when enquirers come to seek out the faith’.

‘Your answers are not sufficient’, Balwone said. ‘Our faith, as I understand it, is that the Most High loves the entire world. We would fain live quietly in our communities, as do you, but then it would seem we are but a sect instead of being men and women of universal stature. I understand the Great One, the Most High, created us all, no matter what our nation, race or religion may be.’

‘That is true’, acknowledged the Shemgridion elder.

‘Then’, cried Balwone with quickened ardour, ‘why do we not abandon special dress, and cloistered villages? Why are we not on the heel, fanning out to all the world?’

Shemmashin’s eyes saddened. ‘The people of Massia have a wonderful history’, he said quietly. ‘In the first days the faith spread rapidly.’ He paused and looked at Balwone with troubled countenance. ‘In those days men of faith were aflame, and their women also. They went from land to land.’ His own pulse seemed to quicken as he said the words. ‘Their word was like a fire that raged through both prairie and forest. Thousands came to Massia’s feet. In those days we burned with the message, as I perceive your own spirit is even now aflame.’

‘You have travelled little of our vast world, Prince Balwone. These kingdoms are secluded, cut off from the great nations and empires. It will be your task to learn the history of the people of Massia, for you know so little of it. You do not know that in the then time even princes were caught up to be men of Massia. At first they spread the message of his peace and love, and it was thought all the world would surrender to this great Prince of Peace. Alas, it did not turn out wholly to be that way. On the one hand there were thousands who professed their faith in Massia because it seemed he would win the nations, but the heart of Massia-love they did not know. Consequently, they pursued campaigns of war against the unbelievers, driving them into submission and forcing them to profess the faith of the Most High.’

Balwone’s eyes flamed with anger. ‘This is not the way to tell of love. This, forsooth, is the way to make more hate.’

Shemmashin acknowledged the wisdom and enthusiasm of his young friend.

‘Dear Balwone’, he said, ‘there are powers greater than the dragons and giants of our making, for it is we who give these creatures substance in their evil. Yet there are evil powers led by a Prince who scorns the purity and love of Massia. He seeks to be the equal of the Most High, and to shatter the love and power of that One. His accusation is that human creatures are without nobility of mind and spirit. He degrades what has been created by the Most High, being contemptuous of their efforts to live in good ways. His is another love, for love he claims to have’.

Here the old man lowered his head, his gaze set outwardly upon the table, but inwardly on the great mystery of universal love as humanity seems always to have known it.

‘As you longed for love to change our world’, he said, ‘so does this evil Prince promise universal love which will excite the human race to live together in peace, but the truth is that the quality of that love is selfish, always seeking its own satisfaction and filled with anger when others will not yield to it’.

By this time the elder was so moved that he stood, and Balwone felt compelled also to rise. The two men continued to look into each other’s eyes.

Then Shemmashin said to Balwone, ‘Great knight of Massia and great prophet of the Most High, it is you who must go back in our history and see the wrong things we have done. You must bear news of this to our leaders, and you must discern what is wrong from what is right. The song you sang tonight—the song such as Nappali had sung—must be sung afresh to the nations who claim the name of Massia as much as to those who do not. You must awake them to the truth we Shemgridions have kept alive for such a time as this—when his beloved prophet would come to learn it, and tell it to the world’.

‘Old father of the faith’, Balwone said affectionately, ‘I have lived where lowest grades of humanity live in poverty and vileness, and I have walked in the palaces of kings. My heart burns to do what you show me is to be done, but I am but one, and a most weak mortal at that.’

‘I had thought this message was new to the world, and that the sad mischances of these ages had not happened to Massia’s peoples. My heart is sorrowful and my spirit burdened. Nevertheless, at his will I go to tell the world of his love. This, by his grace, I know I can do’.

His face was turned to the centre of the village where there was still singing, and where folk were busy with conversation.

He spoke as he watched, his face now turned away from the elder.

‘Dear Shemmashin’, he said with fervour. ‘Give me some of your people. Clothe them in the garb that others wear, so that they can mingle by nature with men and women, and so tell the message. Let us be troubadours of joy in a world which is bound in its laws and its fears, that it may be released by Massia into the deeper joy of love.’

When the old man said nothing, the knight told him, ‘I will first take my Roget and we will go to Paelfric, king of Cathrid, and I will tell him of Massia, whether he receive that truth or not. Then I will return and we will set out for the ancient kingdoms who profess Massia, yet know him but little. We will go, even, to kingdoms beyond them and seek to light fires within them, also’.

The elder gripped Balwone by the right arm. ‘This you must do, beyond doubt. In some ways your going to Paelfric may not be profitable for us. It may even do us harm, but what happened at Zed has taught us that we must be more a people on the move than we have been. We believe that as steel is drawn to a magnet, so there will be drawn to us those who wittingly or unwittingly seek the Most High. We have not only been guardians of the truth, but also proclaimers of it, but then only in this quiet way. We do none harm, but the old gods seem strong to these of the northern kingdoms, and their Prince who invented them seeks to stir the people with fear that the gods will turn against them and bring retribution if they desert their deities. That is why Gothroyd destroyed our village in Zed. Now these kingdoms may seek others of us who dwell in their forests. It is the battle against Massia that is at the heart of the matter.’

He turned to Balwone. ‘Your questions tonight were well asked. We must abandon our garb. We must not seclude

ourselves. We must go where others go, and live where they live.

‘All this will not be easy, for we must meet to worship. As you know, in these feudal days the classes of the people are detected by their apparel, and we must wear that of the poor people, the peasants, the yeomen, and not that of the lords of manors and nobles of castles. There are laws for these different classes and we must learn to live with them.’

He sighed. ‘Our way of community will never be lost, but the communal way of life is as it was in earlier days. Opportunity to worship together will not be lost, but it will be watched, and we may be endangered. No matter: it is what we must do for this time.’

‘As for you, Prince Balwone, you must now sleep, and prepare for your new journey on the morrow. I will speak with my fellow elders and we will talk with certain of our people. Later we must speak with them all. When you return from audience with Paelfric we will be awaiting you. Continue to pray for us. Adventure lies ahead for us all.’

The knight was deeply moved. He knew he would not sleep for hours for thinking of the great travel and venture of the future that lay ahead, and he was awed by the importance and immensity of the task.

Roget was coming to their hut as Balwone was returning from the elder, and in the hut his esquire sat whilst he explained the task the elder had said would be his. The two men, seated in the rushes, with the flickering tallow-wick above them, shared their feelings for what was before them. Finally, Balwone told of their impending visit to Paelfric, king of Cathrid, and Roget’s eyes gleamed.

‘Would that that man might come to know and love our Massia’, he said.

‘Somewhere, behind every man’, said the knight, ‘there is the knowledge of the Most High. Massia they may not know, but of the Most High they may know much. Only when they come to know Massia will they truly know the Most High. Yet this advantage we have—that they know something of the Most High, and even of his laws. Within them the ancient conscience

speaks, and that much we have in our favour. We must pray deeply, and it may be that this king will be the first from the northern kingdoms to convert’.

‘May it so be’, said Roget fervently in his rough country dialect.

By this time both were tired and they rolled over in their rushes. It was Balwone and not Roget who was first asleep. For him the day had been long and tiring. Roget, in whose mind was a mixture of these strange and wonderful thoughts, soon disposed of them and was himself asleep, snoring no less than his royal master.

CHAPTER FIVE

Balwone of Massia, and Paelfric of Cathrid

‘SIRE, thou dost aspire to great heights when thou seekest to win king Paelfric to our Lord Massia.’

It was Roget who spoke these words as the two men, their horses laden with travelling gear, were riding through the royal forests of Cathrid. The day was glorious enough to make all men aspire to greatness, or at least to have trust in their god, that all augurs well for them.

The two men would pause from time to time, either to hear the symphony of birds and insects which made music for their ears and cheer for their hearts, or delight in the silence which unaccountably happens and which speaks of sweet serenity beyond the bitterness of man, and the hopelessness of his mind. They had left Morna behind in the village of the Shemgridions, thinking the journey would be too demanding for him. Later, when they reported back, they would take him on their longer, but slower, journey. Now they were set on seeing Paelfric of Cathrid, and on coming to know his mind; perhaps even changing it.

Roget broke such a silence. ‘Sire, this man Paelfric has many wise men at his court. He is not thy Zagon, and certainly not thy Gothroyd. Rumour has it that he is a man of peace, and one who seeks for justice with his people.’

‘Paelfric is an old man’, replied Balwone. ‘When Flamgrid was little more than a stripling, he once advised the kings of Zed and Cathrid to allow Zagon of Manignia to pass through their lands, and even to destroy many of their people—Flamgrid’s wisdom being that they should hide their nobles, their women

and even their army in the forests, since to fight Zagon would mean the utter destruction of their kingdoms, and to no point. I trow it must have been that experience which changed the Lord Paelfric.

‘Now this king is aged beyond many, and he has a desire, I am sure, to understand the ways of the planets, the wisdom of the sages, that he might make sense of this strange world in which we live.’

‘He may be all the harder for that’, said Roget roughly. ‘They who love or fear their gods, less easily surrender them.’

‘What, then, do the gods give that will satisfy the heart of an old king?’ asked Balwone. ‘Methinks we may happen upon a good conversation, and we have a quiet but hidden sword that may wound to life, and, also, to the death of the pagan deities.’

‘High words’, grumbled the mountain of a man, with his jet black beard and shock of hair. He turned his glittering eyes to the knight of Manignia. ‘Thou art ever one, Prince Balwone, for confronting monarchs to thine own despite.’

‘True enough’, agreed Balwone, ‘but it was oft for my own satisfaction. Now I have a lien on all monarchs and common people from Massia himself, and I shall not so easily stumble’.

‘Good enough’, agreed Roget in his abrupt manner. Then he became more cheerful. ‘If this golden day be a true omen, then yon Paelfric may fall for the tongue of peace that has been given.’

Balwone spoke to Roget, looking him in the eyes. ‘What in this world do men and women have apart from the Most High?’

‘Nothing’, agreed Roget, ‘but they are apt to amuse them-selves with many things ere they fill that coffin at the end’.

‘True’, said the knight, ‘but when a feast is set before them from the Most High, then they see all things else but tasteless’.

‘Such is not attractive or palatable to all’, said Roget. ‘That is why the Most High sent Massia into our world, into our midst, and set him up strangely before our eyes.’

The two great horses plodded on along the forest path, unmoved by the sudden flash of a bird, or some creature making noises from the undergrowth of the woods. Above them from time to time flew a falcon, whilst the great eagles soared high in the heavens, even beyond the kites whose piercing eyes sought

out the carrion of dead birds and animals. The two men rode in the acceptable warmth of the day, their minds set on their new venture, and their spirits at peace. That is, until the royal posse came upon them, halting them with stern, official commands.

Balwone saw an old man, proud enough, and yet serene. He was frail, but he sat upright in the royal saddle, his steed a beautiful black mare, groomed to shining, who shook her head up and down, as though impatient of standing. The man astride her was Paelfric of Cathrid, in soft clothing and not in armour, though his courtiers and guardsmen were in armour and well equipped for battle.

The knight of Manignia was in armour, and he raised his visor to better see and be seen.

‘I am Balwone of Manignia, son of Facius and Merphein.’

The king nodded curtly. ‘Of that I am aware. What brings you into Cathrid? I welcome you, though I know you do not come from king Zagon, or even from *Zagonholme*. News has it that you come into these places for the good of Shemgridions who dwell in our kingdom. What, then, would you have of us?’

‘An audience, Your Majesty, if it please you. There are many things I would discuss with you.’

The king nodded. ‘There are also matters I would discuss with you.’ He paused, and then his eyes gleamed. ‘I am told that you are a disciple of Flamgrid, he who warned us when I was but a youth that danger lay in confronting the old Zagon of Manignia. I have gleaned much about this sage, and would fain speak with him myself.’

‘In these days’, said Balwone, ‘he is confined within the royal castle of Zed. Would that he were free to talk with many of us’.

The king bowed his head in assent. It seemed to Balwone that he sighed gently. As he gazed at the monarch he saw the lined face and the tired eyes, and he felt pity for the man. He doubted whether the king had long to live.

His eyes roved around the assembled, mounted courtiers and royal guard. Their eyes were upon him, but he sensed no hostility in them, and for this he was thankful. The king motioned him

to his side, and Roget knew where to ride in the cortege according to protocol, and the place of esquires.

There seemed to be a quietness in the whole posse as they rode, sun-drenched, towards the palace. As they emerged from the forest, the lovely vista of undulating pastures, higher rolling hills, all green of pasture and thoughtful landscaping, greeted them. In the distance they saw the castle with its stone walls, central keep, mullioned windows, ramparts, turrets and parapets, and below, a broad bailey. Surrounding the castle was the royal city of Cathrid, Endomin, and Balwone realised with surprise that it was the most spacious city he had ever viewed. It had its own bailey walls, and a drawbridge to enter it, so that the city acted as the first fortification of the castle.

His eyes roved around the country and he saw the demesnes of landed knights, and doubted not that much of these were farmed by yeomen and serfs under them. The kingdom seemed so pacific, and Balwone was strangely stirred. The day could come for him, were he to marry Megafriith, daughter of Zagon, when he could be king of Manignia, and for a moment there was fluttering of his heart. He was aware that the gaze of Paelfric was upon him, and he blushed as fully as he had years before when he had first met Gothlic, princess of Zed. Only Merom, the beautiful daughter of the yeoman Firsini, had ever stirred him so much.

Now it was a vast kingdom at which he was looking, and all that was royal in his blood rushed to his head. How fine a thing to be king of such a vast domain. He remembered his father, Facius, who had declined a kingdom, choosing, rather, to pursue wisdom for its own sake. For the moment he felt he heard dragons' wings about him, and even a faint sulphurous smell, but it was momentary. Desire died for such a kingdom as this one, for his mind began to compass the vastness in both time and eternity of the kingdom of Massia.

He was prompted to ask Paelfric why he had been riding so far from Endomin and the royal palace.

The king's eyes lit up and he edged his steed closer to Ballia and Balwone. He spoke in a low voice. 'I have long desired to

meet you, Balwone of Manignia. I had heard you, like your father, had declined the opportunity of a kingship. You will know that such rejections are rare. Men long for power.' He sighed. 'It is not power I want, but peace, and I have been assured that you know the way of peace. I was glad, therefore, when I heard you were visiting my Shemgridion people.'

He waved a hand as though to banish Balwone's surprise. 'I have no quarrel with those peaceful people', he said, 'and indeed I sometimes envy them. They are content with so little, and they who are so little as a nation have so much in themselves. I would long ago have conversed with them, but powerful knights of my kingdom would oppose this. They are alarmed at the inroads of this Massia of whom people are now speaking. Nor is it only the commonalty who thus speak. There are yeomen and lords of demesnes who likewise have this personage in mind'.

He looked at Balwone. 'I trow that you are one of his. Is this not so?'

Balwone simply looked at him with a steady stare, and the king nodded. 'I had thought thus, and I went to sift you out within my royal forests. It will be good that we speak separately from my lords and ladies, although some of them are sympathetic.'

Balwone's heart beat fiercely. Thoughts rose to his mind like birds battering at a citadel, or rather, finding resting places along its parapets. His innermost passions were roused by the thought of the aged king and his intimate desire for personal and political peace. He remembered his talk with Shemmashin, and their longing that a king of the northern kingdoms might succumb to Massia, dangerous as that might be for him, and revolutionary as it would appear within the northern paganism.

When they reached the outer bailey of the city, Balwone was amazed at the extent of the suburbs. The drawbridge was down, as it generally remained during the day, and the sound of the horses' hooves clattering across it again stirred the knight with many memories. Particularly he remembered his family's magnificent castle *Zagonholme*, then the city of Magnion, and lastly the

great palace castle of king Gothric of Zed. It was natural that his blood should flow faster, and that warm feelings should rise in him. This had been his environment for most of his life until Flamgrid had motioned him into an even more wonderful world, the citadel of wisdom, and later, the kingdom of Massia.

He could not but thrill at the sight of the city. Had there been games and jousting as in past days at the times of the tournaments, then it would have been decorated with pennants and flags and bunting, but today it was not so. Crowds lined the main street, and there was cheering and clapping and shouting as the king passed. Balwone could see that he was a much beloved monarch. His train which followed was composed of calm—even staid—knights and soldiers of the royal guard.

The second drawbridge had been up, but now was let down, and on the castle side they raised the portcullis and again Balwone sensed the thrill of the clapping of horses' hooves as they moved over the drawbridge into the castle. There was a walled space—a bailey—around the castle, and the horses were taken to their stables by the ostlers, Roget following them.

Paelfric led Balwone through the great dining hall, up stairs and into a room which was richly furnished. The cedar and blackwood furniture simply glowed, but, for all that, it was a simple room. A man was ordered to bring drink and food to refresh the guest and the king, and then Paelfric waved away the two attendants who never left him, night and day. Indeed they were puzzled at the king's peremptory dismissal and looked backwards as they went, thinking they might be recalled.

'In these days one needs loyal keepers', said Paelfric, explaining the dismissal. 'With you I am doubly safe.'

Again that tremor of pleasure went through the knight. He knew matters of great significance were afoot. At the same time he felt apprehensive for Paelfric, so frail and weak he seemed, and so very, very aged.

Paelfric raised a pale hand and regarded it with indifference. 'As you see, my young friend, I am ageing. Rapidly you might say. At court there are a few who make preparations for my death and for the choosing of a new monarch. Even so, that matter is virtually settled. Zenli my eldest son has been groomed for the

throne, and I think we have every reason to trust that he will carry on the royal line in true fashion.'

He leaned towards Balwone. 'You are the son of Facius and Merphein, and I knew them over many years. I always had trust in them. Now I have trust in you. I am impatient to hear your story about the golden egg on the Holy Mountain, of your battles with evil creatures, and of your allegiance to the Lord Massia. These are things I have longed to hear in these later years.'

'I am surprised, your highness, that you have heard of these tales', Balwone said. 'In one sense they are but nothing, and yet, in another way of speaking they are truly important.'

He was about to speak when a servant came bearing refreshments. He placed them on a table at the king's direction and respectfully withdrew, bowing as he went.

The drink was cider, and Balwone felt refreshed as he drank. He nibbled an oatcake, and began his story.

'My Lord of Cathrid, I find it difficult to encompass all that has happened to me over these latter years. Flamgrid the cobbler is well known through these northern kingdoms as a sage. The royal court has never taken my fancy, and, when quite young, my parents sent me to be taught by him. Once, and indeed in the days when he offered wisdom to yourself and Gothroyd of Zed, he talked with my father and prophesied that a child would be born of Facius my father, and Merphein my mother, and this in their old age. That was why they felt the cobbler would know how to teach and train me.

'The day came when my apprenticeship was finished and my master Flamgrid told me that, as a prophet, I would have to spend some years amongst human beings of every ilk—the rich and the poor, the good and the evil, aristocratic as well as the off-scourings of human society. This I did, sometimes to the extent of humiliation and pain, but mostly to the learning of deeper wisdom.

'Then it came to that time when I was to make pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain, which often I had seen in visions and dreams. The passage to that holy shrine was to be my vocation for life. I was to bring to the world that which is badly needed,

namely the love that would unite us all in one and change our unhappy divisions to complete amity. Kingdoms would cease their wars, and the selfishness of human beings would change to a care and concern for others.'

The pale countenance of Paelfric now knew a gentle flush of colour.

'What magnificent wisdom!' he cried. 'What wonder of love!'

Balwone looked sad. 'Would, sire, that it had all happened that way.'

He then told the king of the battles he had had with strange supernatural creatures, and even more, with his own heart.

'How proud I was', he said mournfully. 'How filled with excitement and pride, yet I did not know that was indeed the case. Nothing could stand in my way. I learned little or nothing from the tragedy which had come to others in the forest of Allein. I pressed on past dragons and giants, and even the illusion of the highest beauty that I had ever seen, the most glorious of women my eyes had ever beheld.'

His countenance paled, and then set grimly.

'I faced that deceit and fought it for what it was, when in my own heart there was deceit even more perfidious.'

Deep interest, delight and bewilderment chased one another across the face of the king. His eyes grew stern, and his face paled again. He was one with the narrative, and yet puzzled by it. Gradually he understood. He covered his eyes with his hands when Balwone recounted the dreadful event of his killing the keeper of the golden egg.

'Nay! Nay!' he cried. 'You could not do such a thing, Prince Balwone.'

Balwone's eyes grew sad. 'So one would think, but the child of noble Facius and Merphein, and the disciple of Flamgrid found that the evil of holy people can be worse than that of serfs, criminals and outcasts.'

Paelfric was looking upon him with horror, but when the prince recounted the judgment of death through which he went, when he was indeed taken into the death Massia had known at the hands of angry men and women, then something of understanding began to come to the bewildered mind of the king.

'You died!' he whispered. 'You died to your evil self? Is this so? How could it be so? How can men die and yet live again? I would fain know this astonishing secret.'

'Ah!' said Balwone, 'that is the mystery. That is the secret of the Most High. That is the mystery of Massia, Prince of Peace. In spite of the enormity of my atrocious deed, my perfidy, my pride and my self-deceit, I died in the anguish of Lord Massia, and I came to live again in the realms of mankind, but in the life of Massia'.

The king was trembling, and looked quite faint. Balwone poured a beaker of cider and took it to him. Paelfric hesitated a moment, and then he drank. Some colour came back to him, and although he gasped for some moments, he was soon him-self.

'It was all a deceit, hey? That love was not true love, yet we all assume it is the love that is true, and believe that one day it might solve the puzzle of men's goodness and their evil.'

Balwone nodded. 'Such is the case, sire, but then a greater thing befell me. It was the forgiveness of the Most High that is brought to us by Lord Massia. I confess that in thinking I was bringing that love to the world which would transform it, I greatly erred. Only Massia can give such love.'

'There is more, Balwone?' asked Paelfric. His breathing seemed almost to be painful.

'There is more, sire', Balwone said. 'And it is the best of all, but Your Majesty looks not well. Shall we speak of these things another time?'

Paelfric nodded. 'Another time it must be.' He looked around as though there might be someone who was listening.

'The things we speak of we must keep private. Tell not your story to another, not even if that one beg you, or seek to have your ear for himself. Not all are friends, and there are enemies of a kind.'

He hit a metal gong and a servant came hastily.

'Take Prince Balwone to his quarters', the king said. 'See that he has all his needs met.'

As an afterthought he added, 'See also to his esquire. I perceive he is a good man'.

To Balwone he said, 'I have a meeting of my Council of the Lords this morrow, so that we will not meet until the next night has passed. Even so, I hope to find time for more talk'.

Balwone bowed himself out, and was led by the servant to his sleeping quarters. He was amazed, and also gratified, by the affluence his room portrayed. He rested for a time, and then drew out his wallet of manuscripts that he might refresh himself in the teachings of his spiritual monarch.

Finally he slept in a peace that no dragon or giant could possibly have invaded.

CHAPTER SIX

Balwone and the Evil Aelfric Collenthribben

ON THE following day Balwone and Roget were free to leave the castle bailey and to cross the drawbridge into the city of Endomin. To some it was a strange sight to see the blonde prince in his princely garments—not his armour—accompanied by the fierce and dark-visaged esquire, when such servants were generally younger than their masters, and candidates for later knighthood. The two men enjoyed each other's company, and it seemed this was to be a welcome day of pleasure for them both.

Normally they would have ridden on their steeds, Ballia being caparisoned as befitted the mount of a prince, and Roget's noble gelding in good fashion, but less in beauty than his master's strong stallion. Today they wished to draw no attention to themselves. Princes, nobles and rich landlords were mounted or rode in fine carriages. For their part, the two men greatly enjoyed walking down the cobbled streets, mingling with the modest crowd and gazing at the displays outside the stores of the merchants. The city square was redolent with history, there being statues of past kings and heroes, or plaques that carried portions of the history of this fine kingdom. Some looked at the two men a little curiously, but most accepted them without questioning. There was something cosmopolitan about this city.

The market area was ablaze with colour of the wares of the sellers. Gaudy cloths, colourful pottery, arts and crafts were liberally displayed, and the brilliance of a variety of fruits stood out against the background of the varied greens of leafy vegetables and herbs. In the city square and here in the market were beasts of burden that bore the produce to the various stalls. Some of the

horses were mean looking, some not. Mostly, men pushed or pulled barrows or carts, but often serfs carried heavy loads on their shoulders or heads. It was rare to see those of the upper class buying in the market place. Their servants did that. For their part, the rich attended the houses of the great merchants.

‘Would, sire’, said Roget after they had traversed much of the great city, ‘that all these belonged to Massia.’

‘In truth, Roget, they do’, his master said sadly, ‘but as yet they do not know it’. Again there came that burning in his breast and restlessness in his mind. He could scarcely bear the pleasure of all they were seeing when he knew, also, the perpetual senselessness of human life that wandered pointlessly on its own way, without aim or goal.

Roget did not seek to jolly him out of his mood. They went past the market place, walking into narrow streets whose storied buildings shut out the light of the sun. The smells of the place were repulsive, causing twitchings of the nose and sighs for the sensing of it all. Sometimes shutters would be opened from above, and slops would be poured out. The smells of slops, urine and faeces were almost intolerable. Beneath them was mud and mire, and the folk who passed them or stared out of barred window cavities were white-faced, often crafty in look, cunning, or simply numbed and despairing. The two men felt their stomachs heave at the misery of it all. They made their way back to the market place, wondering why they had explored the place of the wretched.

They were passing through the fruit and vegetable vendors when Roget caught sight of a garment which he could have sworn was of the Shemgridion people. He pointed out the wearer to Balwone who made his way towards the stall. It was filled with soft and hard fruits, and vegetables.

Balwone asked the vendors, ‘Are you not Shemgridions?’

‘Yes, sire’, they replied with smiles. ‘We often come here to sell our products.’

Balwone felt a tremor of delight. He asked, ‘The people do not persecute you?’

They shook their heads. ‘Many kinds of people make their way to Endomin. During the day the drawbridge is down, for

here there is much commerce, and the city folk are glad of our produce.’

Balwone smiled his pleasure. ‘May Massia bring you deserved prosperity’, he said. He and Roget were about to pass on.

The leading Shemgridion, an unusually tall man, put out a hand and held Balwone by a sleeve. He looked about him to see whether anyone was looking in their direction.

‘Of a truth, Lord Balwone’, he said, ‘there is great danger. Shemmashin has sent me to warn you. Gothroyd of Zed is in great anger and has sent a messenger to King Paelfric, warning him against you, and telling of the rebellion of our folk in the Zed forest’.

Balwone looked to see whether any were watching. It seemed not, and he whispered fiercely, ‘That is a lie! The Shemgridions have done no harm to any kind’.

The tall man nodded with pleasure. ‘That we know, sire, but the battle against us is heating up. It seems some of the kings of these northern nations are afraid the old system of worship and life may crumble before the steady onslaught of our Massia. They would destroy us from the face of the earth.’

Balwone was about to reply when he saw two men walking towards them. Their demeanour troubled him, and so he began talking loudly about the quality of the Shemgridion fruit.

‘Do you call this fruit excellent?’ he asked. ‘Then think again. I wager you have brought this from rogues who have stolen it, and now you would sell it cheaply to be rid of your ill-gotten gains.’

The tall Shemgridion perceived the change in Balwone’s manner of talking, and guessed the reason.

‘Sire’, he said simply, ‘we are honest men and women, and indeed grow such fruits and grain ourselves. We sell cheaply because our produce spoils so quickly’.

The two men had almost reached them, but had paused at the next stall, and Balwone knew they were listening with interest.

He shook his head. ‘We are here but for a short time, and we need no fruit. Even so, we would warn you to have care. King Paelfric wants only the best for his citizens. Look to the reward of honesty and goodness, and serve all well.’

He quietly moved to the next stall, standing near the two strangers, and looking down at the variety of produce. He then addressed the two men.

‘We are somewhat strangers to Endomin’, he said, ‘but then friends of this land. His Majesty is presently our host, and we are finding our pleasure in this great city’. He looked back at the Shemgridion vendors.

‘They seem but simple folk’, he said. ‘I was surprised at the quality and price of their goods. I imagine there is no harm in them.’

‘Quite so, sire’, the spokesman of the two said. ‘They are called Shemgridions, and are people deep in religion.’

The knight evinced interest. He took the man by the arm and led him away. His companion followed, and Roget walked in the rear. He was concealing his admiration for his master and seemed only deep in thought. He thought his master would soon rid himself of these two strangers whom he sensed to be spies of a kind. He could not hear the conversation of the leader, but his trust was in Balwone.

To his surprise the man pointed up into that part of the city from which they had emerged, troubled by the smells of the place, and the denizens of evil and despair who lived there.

As he drew near he heard the man say, ‘Sire, this is the heart of our city, and though there be many who would never enter it, it holds the secrets of the sages. There dwells within it one of the ancients who knows the story of the past when our nation was first among all peoples, and it is he who is guardian of the ancient wisdom’.

Roget saw a gleam in Balwone’s eye. He had taken the man again by an arm, and was urging him towards the narrow streets.

‘I would see this great sage’, he said. ‘I would learn wisdom of him if that be the case.’

Roget did not like the smiles on the faces of the two men. He sensed danger. Even so, he followed the knight and the two men, but his hand was upon the short hunting knife he ever kept in his belt. He noted, then, that the men carried swords, and knives also.

They proceeded through the depressed area which before they had scarcely penetrated. Having passed through it, they found

themselves in a suburb whose houses were an improvement on the stinking slum, but the air of depression—Roget would have said, oppression—was still apparent.

The two men led Balwone and Roget into a windowless house which was so dark that a tallow-wick had to be constantly kept alight. At least, this was what the men perceived.

In the centre of the room, which was without furniture, was an old man, seated on a pile of old blankets. His hair was wild, uncombed, flowing about him down to his waist. He was, doubtless, old, but Balwone recognised, with a little trembling, that this man was—as he had been told—a sage.

He bowed in deference to the status of the old mentor. The clothing of the man was but rags, and there was a stench which offended the noses of the two visitors. Even so, they concealed their distaste and gave a certain honour to the aged person. The men who had led them seemed to have something of a leer on their faces. Perhaps they thought the sage was no sage but only a mountebank, and consequently despised the knight and his esquire for being so fooled.

Roget, for his part, was uneasy. He had always hated sorcerers and their ilk, and his mind set upon the idea that this man was not a true sage, but a sorcerer.

The old man bade the men who had brought Balwone and Roget to bring them stools from another room. This they did and they were offered something to drink. They politely refused. At the same time they leaned forward in anticipation of what the old man would tell them. Roget kept his eyes on the two strangers. He prepared himself for anything which might happen.

Balwone looked into the depths of the eyes of the old man. His skull, under its knotted hair, was little less than a death’s head. The skin was drawn tightly around the bone-structure, and the mouth a set rictus, the teeth worn and almost black, the red tongue wagging at the rear of the mouth. That he was senile was, however, an illusion. Enormous power glared from the eyes which he kept fixed upon the prince. There was something about him which puzzled Balwone, some sense of having seen this person before, but his memory did not serve him well.

The old man lifted his two skinny arms, waving his hands at the knight, as though performing some ritual. When he spoke his voice was almost a cackle.

‘Wisdom comes to us over many years’, he said, ‘and I perceive that you, too, are a man of wisdom’.

Balwone bowed his head slightly.

‘There be many wisdoms’, said the sage. ‘There be the wisdom of the people of light and the wisdom of the people of darkness.’

He gasped a little as he spoke. ‘We see that what is called light is really darkness, but what is said to be darkness is really light.’

Balwone wished that somehow Morna, their hound, were here. He would settle in this room, in the half-light of it, his head forward on his paws, but his eyes would be fixed on the aged teacher. The flicking of his eyes upwards to Balwone would tell that master all he needed to know. A growl from the mastiff would tell even more. He sighed inwardly, for he felt the two strangers had led Roget and him into a place of danger.

He said gently, ‘What is darkness and what is light? Surely one does not mistake one for the other?’.

‘Ha!’ spoke the death’s head lips. ‘For long, people have been deceived into thinking the one they call “the Most High” is the god above all gods. That is not so. The world was not created by one god alone. That is high deceit. It was made by lords of the true light, those whom today they call the lords of darkness.’

Roget did good service for the absent Morna. He growled deeply. The skinny creature in the centre of the room scarcely heard him. His high-pitched voice was filled with venom and he cried shrilly, ‘True wisdom lies with those they call the lords of darkness. They have power over men and all creatures, and they have always ruled the world, and will continue to do so’.

He thrust forward a hand towards Balwone, his thin fingers extended stiffly. ‘Have you ever vanquished a dragon? Now come on mortal and tell me that you have.’ His voice was a high cackle.

‘Have you ever destroyed a giant? No! Never! You have had your moments of success with them, but their power is greater than yours!’

Balwone felt his hackles rising. So did Roget. His great black eyes glittered with something resembling rage.

Balwone thrust out a hand to stay the esquire. His eyes were still on the bundle of fury before him. Now it was hissing like a snake.

‘Your great Most High bid you bring love to the world, and you went through many trials, but in the end the powers you call darkness defeated you. Your love was no love. The best you could bring forth was a reptile, and today that reptile rules in the hearts of men and women everywhere. The Most High can do nothing about his reigning, for in fact he is the Most Low.’

His words split as he uttered them, and now he was punctuating them with maniacal laughter.

So he exploded on the two men, ‘Your light is darkness which cannot light the ways of human creatures, and the gods and lords of the Prince of what you call darkness has the hearts and minds of human creatures full under his sway’.

The men who had led them to this vile abode were now nodding. Their faces were fixed in a double sneering. They looked with contempt on Balwone and Roget. The prince and his servant had no doubt that the intention of these was to destroy them.

Balwone said, ‘The ancient prophets of the Most High said there would come those who in his name would tell the world that darkness is light and light darkness. They would call what is bitter sweet, and what is sweet they would call bitter. All this would flow out of the unclean streams of their own hearts’.

‘A-h-aaah!’ came the snarl of the creature of now livid lips. ‘Too long, Balwone of Facius and Merphein, you have brought uncleanness to the earth. Now you would unseat the great lord of Cathrid.’

‘You lie!’ cried Balwone. ‘I have the deepest regard for Paelfric, and in every way would support him.’

There was silence for a few dark moments, and then the creature before them almost spat out his answer.

‘Paelfric, lord of Cathrid!’ he shrieked. ‘He is no more king of this kingdom than is Gothroyd of Zed, or Zagon of Manignia. Your poor mind considers it knows what is wisdom, but I am Aelfric Collenthribben, the true wise one, and I tell you

the unseen lords of these northern kingdoms are ancient gods who made the earth and all creatures, and are the true gods. Your Most High—so called—has no power over these. They will retain their kingdoms until the day you call Doomsday, and then it shall be known as Triumphday, because what you call darkness is more powerful than the pitiful thing you call light.'

For a moment Balwone said nothing. He glanced at Roget and shook his head. 'Nay', he said. 'Do not approach this horrible creature. He has powers at hand by which he would vanquish you.'

He turned towards the two men who had their swords drawn, with hands also on their daggers.

'Let be', he said. 'Do not approach us. Paelfric will have you hung, drawn and quartered by tomorrow at noon if you lift so much as a finger on us.'

The two men laughed uproariously. 'We are from Paelfric's court and we surely seek your death.'

'You are not of Paelfric', said Balwone. 'That I trow. I have the gift of knowing men and I know you to be of darkness and not of light.'

'Destroy them if you will', screamed the wizened creature as the two men advanced towards Balwone and Roget. 'If you do not vanquish them with your swords, then I will with my power.'

'On guard!' Balwone shouted. There was no thought in his mind that it was not a thing of love to destroy these two servants of Paelfric's opponents. His hand went to his sword side, and, with a thrill, he realised his own sword was absent, but the golden sword he had previously known was at his side.

Roget would have rushed upon them, but Balwone shook his head. He lifted his sword on high, and it glittered even in the light of the tallow-wick. Momentarily he caught sight of the terror in the eyes of the sorcerer, and he moved steadily towards the two.

The same terror was in their eyes. The bravado of the few previous moments now turned to total fear.

'The golden sword!' they cried, and their terror enlarged.

Behind them all the apostles of idols and dark lords were screaming as though to have the two men even give their lives in destroying Balwone.

A touch of the prince's sword laid them both in the dust of the floor.

'Lemery's Sword', they choked out. 'Nothing can stand against it.' Their eyes asked terrified questions, but they could not speak more.

'Up!' said Balwone. 'Up and out of this dust. Go back to your masters and tell them that Aelfric Collenthribben has no power greater than that of Massia, servant of the Most High. Today you have witnessed his defeat, and defeat it will be for them if they continue their loyalty to the old gods.'

The men scrambled to their feet and were gone in a trice. The commanding shrieks of the agitated sorcerer went unheeded. For his part, he was foaming at the mouth, screaming imprecations and foul oaths, and threatening annihilation of the two visitors.

It was to this maniacal thing that Balwone turned.

'You sought us out to destroy us', he said. 'You have failed, and you will fail, time and again.'

He held the golden sword in his two hands, upturned to heaven, and in his fingers it seemed like a cross reversed. The very sight of it sent the writhing creature into further frenzies of hatred and vituperation. Then, as Balwone advanced steadily towards him, he seemed to shrink almost into nothing. His shrieking died away into faint cries, and then a mumbling, the words of which only the sorcerer himself knew. Finally, his shrunken head flopped forwards, and only feeble hisses emerged from his livid, and twitching lips.

It was obvious to Balwone and his servant that the creature expected its end from the golden sword of Balwone.

'Look, creature of darkness', Balwone commanded. 'Look!'

The shrunken sage of evil lifted his malicious eyes to Balwone who stood, now, without sword. The man of the wisdom of darkness saw to his astonishment that there was no golden sword in the hand of the prince. His gaze was upon the sword in the scabbard and his perverse cunning told him that it was Balwone's own sword, one of nature and not of the Most High.

Instantly he came to life. His hideous cackling began afresh and he slapped his hand upon the floor and sniggered with perverse delight.

'Now', he cried, 'we shall match the wisdom of Prince Balwone with the servant of glorious darkness, Aelfric Collenthribben himself!'

His obscene chuckling raised Roget's hackles and he would have rushed upon the perverse creature, but Balwone held him back with a look.

'Let us see what will happen', he said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Events Leading to the Passing of the Old Gods

THE CREATURE Aelfric, chuckling evilly, dragged himself across the floor to a small box. He pulled his body upwards until he had grasped the small pottery bowl with the glimmering tallow-wick in it. He shuffled himself back to the centre of the room, extracted something from the small container, and, seating himself in cross legged fashion, he drooped his head and the long, knotted locks of hair fell over his face and partially hid the ritual he was enacting.

At first he gave a low moan. Then he began an indistinct and mournful liturgy, which began to rise in volume and somehow have a regular throb to it. There was no clapping because the sorcerer had one hand filled with coloured powders. As he chanted slowly, he sprinkled some of the powder mixture onto the lighted wick. The small flame extended, flickered upwards, elongating itself and strange colours were seen within it. The priestly chant came a little faster, and then even faster, until all the powder had been exhausted in the flames.

Then the sage of darkness began a sobbing chant, changing from his dirge-like litany to a wailing cry. Roget felt his blood grow cold, but Balwone looked sceptically at the ritual.

'Where have you hidden your prince?' he said caustically to the sorcerer. 'Call him before us if you can.'

There was a sudden gust of frozen air, the cold flow of a wind that smelt sulphurous. There was a huge flash of light from the tiny tallow-wick bowl, and then that light wavered, extended itself and became an awful form.

There it was, the largest dragon Balwone had ever seen, huge as it stood upon its substantial haunches, and, towering above them all, it looked down from a head that was breathing fire and smoke while its tongue lolled and its jaws worked furiously, salivating, as it were, blood. The colour of the creature was red, more crimson than Balwone had seen before. It reminded him of blood, and he doubted not but that the monster had tasted such, even to its surfeit. Behind the brilliance of the scarlet skin, there was a green phosphorescence which shimmered through the carmine scales. The eyes were bulbous, and their stare, hideous. The great claws of its feet and its hands shone with strength, and Balwone, for a moment, felt a spasm of nausea, but that quickly passed.

He realised that Roget could see the huge creature and was terrified. The dragon sensed the fear of the man, and it spoke with a roaring voice.

‘You need not fear I will destroy you at this moment. I have better things to do. To destroy you is to deny you suffering, and to deny myself the pleasure I anticipate.’

The head swivelled so that it now stared down at Balwone.

‘Your time has now come’, it said. ‘You know that. You know that you cannot hold out against me. What my servant Aelfric Collentribben has told you this day is true. My strength exceeds that of the Most High and your Massia who, though great in your eyes, is but puny and his strength of no consequence when he opposes me.’

If it were possible for a dragon to smile, then that was what it did.

‘You have been taught’, it said, ‘that I am an illusion, that I am but a manifestation of the evil that is down in the depths of you’.

It gave a roar of laughter that shook the building. The sorcerer was in a silent rapture, glowering in delight at the consolidated evil before him. As in a trance he sat, both hands clasped at his breast, and his whole being adoring the monstrosity that breathed and bellowed before him.

‘I am not the evil that dwells in you. I am the evil—as you would call it—which dwells in all creatures. Rightly known it is

not evil, but the wisdom of true light, that light which you call darkness. I am all human creatures from all time, taken up into my supernatural world. What you call lust: I am that. What you call violence: I am that. I am what you call vile death and impure life. I am all the sins and guilts of all men and women for all time, and everything comes to me, because my corruption, depravity and pollution are brought together to present a monstrous threat to your weak-kneed and vacillating prince.’

As it coughed from its dragon-laughter the fumes of its polluted being threatened to destroy the two servants of Massia.

‘Let Massia come forth’, it said, ‘and I will immediately destroy him. I am all mankind in its most hateful and violent forms, yet I am but this in order to dethrone the Most High and show him up for the weak pretender that he is. The powers he has given to all are mine, for I have gathered them together, fostered and feathered them, and they will fly in the face of his supposed Eminence’.

On the floor, the wizened Aelfric had emerged from his trance and was clapping his hands, bowing incessantly, and crying the praises of the monster he adored.

There was silence for a moment and Balwone thought Massia might appear before their eyes, castigating the vain, crimson creature, but there was no such appearance.

The dragon laughed so uproariously that the laughter threatened to shake all things, perhaps even the entire city of Endomin.

It was Balwone who spoke. ‘Massia would not come at the bidding of the likes of you’, he said. ‘He is the holy one of all time, begotten of the Most High, and you are but a swollen bag of vile deceits and monstrous evil. Desist, foolish creature. Massia will not rest until he has broken the evil wills of men and nations, and until his love has drawn all to the bosom of the Most High.’

‘Bravely spoken, trifling servant of Massia’, said the monster. ‘Even so, brave words will not win the world.’ Its great fisted claws thumped its own breast and it gave a hideous cry of triumph. ‘It is I who will dethrone your Most High, and he will serve me in foul pits of the underworld.’

Balwone felt at his side to see whether the golden sword had returned. Then he remembered the authority Massia had long ago given him.

'Why do I dally with thee, foul beast?' he asked. 'In the name of the Most High, and in the authority of Massia, I bid thee begone. "Begone!" I say.'

Roget waited with breath suspended. He wondered at the bravery of his master in facing the horrible creature, but then to his surprise there was a swirling breath, a burst of hot wind, a flash of crimson, and the hideous thing had vanished.

Aelfric Collenthribben stared in horror at the event. The authority of Balwone stunned him. A grudging tribute for the incredible event was forced from his lips.

'Balwone of Manignia commands the great dragon and he obeys?' he asked. It was as though he thought the dragon, so ignominiously banished from the scene, might suddenly reappear with even greater fury to vindicate itself, but it was not so. His whole body went rigid with fear.

Balwone stared thoughtfully at the sorcerer. 'Old Aelfric Collenthribben', he said. 'You beware of the creatures with which you have traffic, else you will dwell in darkness and in torment with them for ever.'

The man began to tremble. Unconsciously one hand pawed the dust of the floor.

'Your Massia is indeed one of great power', he wailed. 'Speak to him that I may not be destroyed.'

'Prince Massia loves the evil ones as also those not so evil', said Balwone. 'I will pray for you. You have much evil of which to be emptied. Refuse the commands of your masters. Leave the old gods, and come to the true, the victorious One, who is not new but eternal, for thus he has ever been.'

'I know none but the old', the pathetic creature complained. A long, low moan issued from him. 'Were I to desert them there would be so much to be undone. Long have I served them and faithfully. In so doing I may have erred beyond return.'

'Then undo it all', said Balwone. 'Join our army which battles for these northern kingdoms, as it has battled for and won so

many through the world. We will unseat these gods. New days of purity and glory lie ahead for all who will bow to Massia. There can be no future for any who belong to the dragon, unless they repent.'

The aged creature gathered up his thoughts into his hands, as it were, seeming to cradle them and look upon them with dismay. He rocked himself, weeping and moaning.

Roget marvelled and said to his master. 'Can even an unclean sorcerer such as this one be forgiven and made new?'

Balwone stared at Roget. 'Why, of course', he said. 'What of Roget who was once a murderer.'

'Ah!' cried Roget in surprise. 'I had forgotten I was ever that. Now I do not think of myself as the murderer, but as the servant of the Most High.'

The wizened sage of evil stared at the great bulk of the esquire. 'You!' he said. 'Once a murderer?'

'Aye,' said Roget, 'that I was until mercy freed me from my plague of guilt'.

The wizened priest of the old gods turned to Balwone. 'Sire', he asked, 'does this man speak the truth?'

'Of a surety', said the knight. 'He speaks the truth. The Most High has rescued him and made him anew, and that he would do for you were you to desire it with all your being.'

'I desire! I desire!' wept the death's head. He rocked backwards and forwards in mingled misery and desire.

Balwone felt a tremor of pity. 'Old man', he said, 'we will pray for you. We will visit you anon. Fear not the old dragon for it is a bag of deceits and so is the prince whom it serves. Fear it not, I say. Now we will begone, but tomorrow we will return. Prepare yourself for a future freedom. The choice lies with you'.

When they emerged the sun was shining. The sky was clear and of a soft blue.

'How gentle are the heavens', said Roget with unconscious poetry on his lips.

'Fair enough', agreed Balwone. He looked at Roget. 'We must hie ourselves back to the palace lest dastardly work already be done. The going of the dragon was at my bidding, no doubt,

but it has gone to wreak its anger and to bring disaster to our lord the king.'

Nothing had changed in the city. Folk looked in their direction no more or less than before. They reached the end of the city bailey and were permitted to make their way into the castle. Balwone and Roget assumed the king would still be in the Council of the Lords. Roget broke off to attend to the horses, and Balwone made his way to his quarters.

Nothing seemed to have changed. Balwone threw himself down upon the mattress of rushes and, being tired, fell asleep.

Late in the afternoon a servant came to tell Balwone that King Paelfric desired to speak to him, and he was escorted to the simple throne room in which he had conferred with Paelfric the previous day.

If possible, the monarch looked more tired and more white of countenance than the day before. Perhaps the Council had brought stress upon him. Refreshments were placed before the king and Balwone, and the servant retired.

Paelfric asked casually how the prince's day had gone. Balwone was uncertain as to what to say. Then he chose to speak.

'You have as one of your citizens a man named Aelfric Collenthribben.'

The king looked up sharply. 'You have come to know this man?' he asked.

'He is a strange one', Balwone said.

'A dangerous man with a strong following', said Paelfric. 'How did it come to pass that you met him on your first day in the city?'

Balwone recounted the amazing events of the past hours, beginning with the Shemgridion vendors, the two strange men, and then the happenings in Aelfric's poverty-stricken house.

He watched the waves of astonishment, delight and dismay which chased themselves across the monarch's countenance. When Balwone finished his narrative, the king plied him with many questions. He was particularly gripped by the appearing of the fearsome dragon, and the later change occasioned in the sorcerer once he witnessed the defeat of the dragon.

'What do you understand by the coming of this strange monster?' he asked Balwone.

'I understand this creature to be both real and unreal', said the prince. 'A physical dragon I do not believe it is, as are other creatures, fashioned by the Most High. Yet it is real enough. As it itself said, it represents the human race in all its degradation and criminal nature and actions. No weapon will destroy it, for that has been my experience. I have fought with dragons before and I have seemed to have wounded them, often badly, but they have reassembled themselves and fought on.'

'And this one of your encounter today: what of it?'

'It all depends on what you wish for your kingdom', said Balwone. 'If you keep the old gods, you will be rarely disturbed by it and its forces of evil. If you deny the gods and change from them, then there will be great troubles.'

Pain etched lines on the old man's cheeks. 'Yet, Prince Balwone, if I cling to the old gods and lords, I will never have peace.' He sighed. 'I had set much store upon your coming. Had you not come, I would have had to seek you out.' He smiled tiredly. 'Not an occupation for a king', he said.

Balwone nodded. 'I have not told you fully what happened to your old sorcerer. It could well be that he will renounce the old gods, and espouse the Most High and his servant Massia. It is also possible that from fear he may remain under the thrall of that creature the dragon and its minions, the gods.'

The king sat back, his hands on his lap. He looked earnestly at the prince. 'This is news that I cannot, now, fully receive', he said. 'As you will have known, I have a group of nobles and their families who live in fear that I might myself depart from our ancient deities. You well know that it is the custom in our land, as in many lands, to sow our seeds on certain days of the astral gods, that we reap and harvest by their times, and that we have days of dancing and sacrifices to the gods who bring fertility to the land, and to our women. It is part of our culture. My folk cannot even imagine life without these holy days and festivities, and any move away from them will surely bring powerful opposition.'

'Just suppose', said the knight, 'that your Aelfric Collenthribben publicly acclaimed the Most High and showed that

Massia has achieved a place higher than the old gods. What then?'

'Just suppose——', mused the king. There was a faint trace of bitterness in his voice. 'No one could believe this to be the case. At best they will say it is a lie and not true. At worst they will charge me with having forced him to change his allegiance.'

Balwone nodded. Nothing was certain regarding the sage of the ancient gods. By tomorrow he might have reverted to his old loyalty. Dragons and giants might have visited him by the score. He changed the subject for the moment, asking how the Council of the Lords had proceeded.

The king puckered his lips. 'It is difficult to know. We have some who wish our nation to progress. The kingdoms both east and west of ours, as also some in the south, have rejected their allegiance to the old gods, and have turned to the Most High and Massia. Within Cathrid there are some who see a change in the winds of time, and wish to turn to the Most High and his Massia. So they are with me, with what is in my heart, without knowing it. They do not know that I wish to change for reasons other than theirs. My reason is one of the heart, one relating to my coming death and to what you call "eternal love". I want peace of mind for myself and my family. These things the old gods cannot give.'

Balwone said, 'If it please your majesty, I will return tomorrow to speak to old Aelfric. He has seen by reason of what happened today that the old is being weakened, and the new is more powerful. He, too, would know the story of other kingdoms and may see changes must come.'

A slight frown came to the king's countenance. 'There is something of the conversions of some kingdoms which worries me. Some have abandoned the old gods and have acclaimed the new because they have been forced to this by the sword, or have come to it for political benefit. Knavery is still in their hearts, and their change of loyalty simply a matter of prudence, of convenience. The Most High above does not use military means, for does he not speak of peace for the heart and the community, and would he deign to use political means for his ends?'

'Never!' said Balwone emphatically. His own eyes clouded. 'I have not been in these kingdoms, nor seen what has happened.'

My only experiences have been with true sages, and with the Shemgridions, and they are not of such an ilk.'

The king said tiredly, 'I would wish my people to acclaim the Most High. I have long studied the history of nations, and certain wisdom has, too, been taught me over the years. The espousing of the Most High must be pure from the start or it will bring even greater divisions than we now know.'

The knight felt his heart warm with the kindly sagacity and insight of the king.

'Let us leave the matter until I visit the old man', he said. 'If he has really changed his view, then we may be able to give this news to your Council of the Lords. It mayhap that they will change their ways. If Your Majesty permits me to speak to them, I may be able to share some of the wisdom that has been given to me over the years.'

That did not seem to be possible to the king, but he did not express his thoughts.

'I wish you all well for the morrow, Prince Balwone. I will retire now for I am weary. Your supper will be served to you here, and you should report to me on your return on the morrow. All success and safety to you and your henchman.'

Balwone bowed low as the king passed from the room. He then sought out Roget and reported the interview. Roget looked thoughtful, his thinking being a mixture of delight and of apprehension. Then he smiled, 'Master, this must be the work of which Shemmashin spoke. It must be that thou hast to go to kings and governors, and that Massia, being with thee in all things, may give thee great success'. He paused and then added, 'With the golden sword, sire, who can withstand thee?'

'Who can stand against us both', said Balwone, 'when the Most High and the Massia are for us'.

Roget nodded delightedly. 'We will also have our band of Shemgridions, and we will have that music and those songs which can enchant and woo the nations.'

'That is true, Roget. A sight of these gentle people may prove much more than even the weight of our words.'

With that, the two friends retired to their several situations.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Days of Visitation of the Most High

IT WAS early next morning when Balwone and Roget arose and left for the city. The king had given orders for the heavy portcullis to be raised and the drawbridge to be lowered. They crossed the moat, the tread of their horses resounding in the dawn. Below, on the waters of the moat, there was a diaphanous blanket of mist. In the air there was that freshness which attends the late summer as the day breaks. Their steeds were not caparisoned, as they wished to draw no special attention to themselves, but the beasts were so noble that none could see them and not ponder their noble origins.

The goal of the inseparable pair was the miserable house of Aelfric Collenthribben. They were not wholly sure of the way, but rode through to the city square which was completely deserted. In the dawn the bronze figures of Cathrid kings and other worthies stood out against the first gleams of the sun in the east. As they rode there was the clatter of the hooves on the smooth cobblestones. In the marketplace there was a motley collection of pariah dogs, rifling amongst the rubbish and detritus for some morsel of food. A few donkeys, laden heavily, were being pushed forward by their masters, and a cry or two of harsh command broke the silence of the vast market arena.

Somewhat unsure, they entered the narrow streets of the city's slum area. The two men were grateful for being mounted: the high-stepping horses picked their way carefully. There was little movement in the houses. Meagre light had filtered down between the storeyed dwellings. Here and there a body lay, whether dead or alive the two men could not determine. As they neared what

they thought to be the house of the old sorcerer, they were surprised to see two men issue from the door of the house.

'See, master', said Roget, 'those two men are Shemgridions'.

Shemgridions they were. They raised hands in a salute.

'Praise be', they said. 'Massia has sent you. We had asked that you might come.'

'For what?' asked Balwone, intrigued, as he and Roget dismounted.

The horses stood still whilst the prince and Roget stooped and entered the dimly lit house.

In the centre of the room was a huddled creature which they supposed to be Aelfric. Aelfric it was, but Aelfric all bloodied and broken. The only sign that he was yet alive was the low moans coming from him.

Balwone turned to the tallest of the men. 'What has happened?' he asked.

'He has been set upon by men or dragons', said the man.

'Your name; what is it?' asked Balwone.

'Shemmashone', said the tall man. 'This is my friend Shemmameem. We were sent by Massia to this place to save the sorcerer from his death.'

A tremor of joy went through the knight, but he looked at the pitiful bundle of crushed humanity in its swathe of rags. Even in the dim light of the tallow-wick he could see the blood on the matted hair of the man.

'Have you attended his wounds?' he asked.

They shook their heads. 'We have been here but a few moments', they said. 'As we arrived we saw men dart from this doorway and flee up the lane.'

Balwone knelt over the unfortunate sage of the ancient gods. It seemed to be a hopeless case: the man was badly wounded.

'It is men who have done this', he said, 'though doubtless the red dragon is behind them. Aelfric must have decided to abandon the old gods and become the servant of Massia'.

'That sounds beyond belief', said Shemmashone, 'but then Massia draws all to himself'.

'Let us give him water', said the prince. The three men hunted for water and a utensil. In the next room was a large water pot.

One discovered a drinking vessel, and also a dish. They forced a little water between the lips of the moaning man. Then, most tenderly, they began to wash the face and blood-matted hair of the sorcerer. They found garments which were little better than the ones on Aelfric, but they gently removed the bloodied clothes and were deeply moved to see how the body had been battered.

‘Great bruises will come by the morrow’, said Shemmashone, ‘but we have specifics which will heal these’.

‘I had thought of taking him back to the castle’, said Balwone.

The two Shemgridions lifted respectful hands of protest, and shook their heads.

‘Doubtless orders have come from some in the palace to destroy Aelfric Collenthribben, if not from the king, then from some noble or nobles’, they said. ‘Let us take him to our village. There he will be prayed over, and healed. We can also minister to his deepest needs, especially the forgiveness he needs to know for the years of his dreadful sorcery and acts of evil.’

Roget could see his master was not convinced.

‘Sire’, he said, ‘he will be safe in the village of these people. In the castle there will be those who will dread the change in his allegiance. These people of Massia are those of great prayer, and this man will be changed in their presence’.

The prince nodded in agreement. ‘How, then, will you carry this man to the village?’

‘First we will carry him to the forest’, they said. ‘There we will make a bier of saplings and leaves, and carry him to the village.’

‘It is a great distance’, said Balwone. ‘Better that we carry him with you to the forest. Having made the bier you can take him to your village.’

‘We trow’, said Shemmashone, ‘that Massia will have told our people. Mayhap they will already be at the end of the woods’.

‘Then we will go ahead’, said Balwone. ‘We will wait if others be not there.’

All were grateful that the man was now unconscious. They arranged old blankets and tatters of clothing on the back of Roget’s mount. The body was laid crosswise on the now padded

saddle and partly secured by lengths of old twine. Roget held the reins whilst Balwone urged Ballia gently along the streets until they arrived at the market place. More folk were now present and they looked with some wonder at the fine horseflesh and the burden of the huddled body. They knew better than to ask questions.

They passed through the town square and reached the second drawbridge which had been let down, but the portcullis had not been raised.

‘In Paelfric’s name open up’, Balwone shouted in his most princely voice.

The men who worked the portcullis did not hesitate. In any case it was almost time to let the vendors in with their daily supplies for the city. The portcullis was raised with a degree of groaning. When it was fastened above, the two men rode through; Roget now sitting behind Balwone.

There was curiosity on the part of the king’s guard who were positioned there to protect the drawbridge, and thus guard the city in case of a raid, but Balwone was confident they would not have known his burden was the old sorcerer—priest of their gods. Nor would he have cared greatly had they questioned him about the matter.

Now he, Roget and the wounded man were on their way to the forest. By this time the tall Shemgridion and his companion were far behind. As they went, the two friends watched the sun shoot up into the dawn sky with rays of translucent pink which reddened and then became a glowing part of the soft blue of the northern skies. Slowly soft, fleecy clouds began to fleck the blue arc. On some farms the herds were being driven quietly for the milking and it seemed that the red cattle were drifting as in a floe on a stream, rhythmically and in a dreamy unity of movement.

Balwone felt at peace, notwithstanding the occasional moaning of the inert bundle of frail humanity on the padded saddle, as Aelfric drifted in and out of consciousness. The knight had a great desire to play his musical instrument—an elaina—which, for some reason, he had come to call Fidelia. It was back at the castle and so he was unable to use it, but his rich voice broke without warning into melody which nothing could have made him repress. The lyric flowed from his inner being. It was not a

song that rhymed, but had rhythm. Roget, tough, old, dark warrior, could not forbear the tears that rose to his eyes. The vibrancy of the man, on whose horse he also rode, somehow entered into him, and without knowing how, he sang along with his master, both of their voices blending in a lyric hitherto unknown to them, the music of which flowed, rose and fell with the movement of the two horses.

*Sweet Massia, beloved of the holy nations,
Lord of the living, loving sons of men,
Caring for such even as Aelfric,
Caring for such as Gothroyd and Zagon,
Withstanding the gods in their foolish zeal,
Waking the nations by your loving,
We give eternal praise to you.*

*High are the praises of the people,
Freed from their bondage by your love,
Sweet are the lays they sing to Massia,
Strong, too, their songs to Massia's God.
Somehow the love has brought them living.
A voice once spoken to make their world
Speaks in the tones of the many prophets,
And speaks as the shepherd does to sheep.
The nations flow from the fold of the Shepherd,
And follow his steps wherever he goes.*

*Sweet Massia, beloved of the holy nations,
Give to us shepherds a like, rich love,
Turn us from ways of war and pain,
Cause us now soon, all to be one.*

It seemed the broken man on Roget's horse went silent under the singing. Perhaps it brought some balm to his spirit. How could they know? They wove their song into the sparkling fresh air of the morning, and hastened their mounts so that they could reach the forest which was now a green line in their sight. Meanwhile, they sang on with the joy which often stimulates songsters and gives that unity of kindred spirits out of true love,

a pure love which causes the songsters to be lost in wonder and praise. It seemed like only a little time before they reached the perimeter of the great woods.

There, perhaps informed by Massia himself, was a band of Shemgridions. Balwone felt a wave of astonishment and gratitude flow over him. Roget, too, was deeply moved. The men gazed on the crushed body of the old sorcerer and pity filled their eyes.

Although there were a few horses amongst them, the men felt it better to bear the unfortunate man on a bier of their own making. Such a stretcher, then, had been made out of slim saplings and the foliage they had stripped from them. Slowly, and with utmost gentleness, they lifted the sorcerer and laid him on the thick mattress of leaves. The wounded man made no sound and Balwone feared lest he had already died.

'He will do well', said one of the men. 'Shemmashin has bid us take great care that Aelfric the sorcerer be brought into our midst. He who was ever the fierce and cruel servant of the ancient gods may yet come to be the loving slave of the Most High.'

It was felt that carrying him by hand, and moving on foot, would prove better than the movement of horsemen holding the bier between them. In fact the narrow paths would not permit this form of travel.

With mixed feelings, Balwone and Roget saw them disappear into the forest. Light was falling between the trees, dappling the men and their horses. Relieved, the knight and his esquire wheeled their mounts and cantered back towards Endomin. They spoke little on the way and sang not at all. It seemed to be in a trice that they arrived at the first drawbridge. They rode through on clattering hooves, and likewise on the second drawbridge, glimpsing for a moment the twinkling surface of the moat below. Unbeknown to them, Paelfric was watching their coming, and orders were issued to Balwone to go straight to the king's palace room.

Balwone found the monarch of Cathrid pensive, but at ease. Paelfric listened closely to the knight's description of what had happened, and occasionally he sighed, but would nod for the

speaker to continue his narrative. When it was finished he rose, went to the mullioned window, and looked out over the city, and then to the country and beyond that to the forest.

‘You did well’, he said, ‘to take him to the Shemgridions. They are famed for their healing powers. They carry ancient secrets of medicines and healing herbs. They will bring him to health if any on earth can do so. Of course, it may yet be too late, but we will this sorcerer will be of a changed mind because of the events which have happened’.

His face darkened as he talked. ‘It is those of this palace and court who have sought to kill the man. Doubtless they have heard how you had authority over the dragon and how you disarmed their two murderers. Doubtless they sent a number of like persons to destroy the old priest before he could betray the gods of our kingdoms. It would seem to be a thing of shame for some of our nobles, that Massia of the Most High should supplant the present idols.’

He rose and walked restlessly around the room. In deference the knight also rose, but the king motioned him to sit.

Finally he came to where Balwone was seated, and looked down at him.

‘We will have great need of the golden sword, that which you call the sword of Lemery. Would that we all had such magic weapons.’

Balwone interrupted respectfully. ‘Your Majesty, I have no such sword. It comes only in times of crisis. I doubt not but that it may come into your hand also, and into the hands of those whom Massia would aid.’

The king nodded, as though that thought were intelligible. ‘That is our only hope’, he said. ‘We have no weapons which will meet the unsheathed fury of people whose gods are demeaned. Though they love not the gods, they deeply fear them, and so are enslaved, and for long they have attributed good days, rich crops and peace from their enemies to be according to the will of the idols. They have devised such deities and the worship of them in ways which give them a certain satisfaction, and often even delight. They will not take kindly to the defection of Aelfric, if that be the case.’

He looked at Balwone. ‘You have no doubt noted the likeness of the sorcerer’s name to my own. The truth is that this man is of royal blood, but from his birth he was ever seeking wisdom, and ever desiring the power of the gods. He was never a man of the courts, nor the politics of the same. To give him his due, he was not avaricious, but he was ruthless to the opponents of the idols to which he was priest for the people. Now much will depend upon his state of mind and body, and whether his disposition is still for the old gods, or for the new Massia.’

He paused for a moment or two and then circled the room. Coming back to the knight, he looked down again.

‘Prince Balwone, this shrunken creature that you encountered on the yesterday, is not, as you think, old and demented. He is not even as old as I, but his fastings and religious exercises have taken their toll. It may be that because of them he will not recover. Should he die, we may be accused of having killed him, for many know that I have long looked for the Most High to visit us, and free us from the tyranny of the old deities.

‘If he lives and espouses the Most High and Massia, then there will again be trouble.’ He sighed. ‘Mayhap this is a visitation of the Most High, and it may be that he will make us a holy nation.’

Balwone remembered the song he and Roget had sung on the way to the forest, and it dawned upon him then that his song was a prophecy of sorts. He said nothing, but kept listening to the king.

‘If’, said Paelfric, ‘he be healed and return to our city and proclaim the Most High, then anything could happen. Folk could turn to the Lord Massia, or they could turn against him. We do not know. Our yearly festival of worship is but weeks away, and the priest may not be healed by that time’.

‘Sire’, said Balwone, ‘is this yearly festival of worship one to all the old gods? Is it a time of great celebration, song, music and dancing?’

‘It is that and more’, said the king. ‘As you know, the gods are the gods of the nations, of the crops, of war, of fortune and misfortune. It is the way they have always been conceived. The whole world has ever lived by its gods. This is why it is

important that Aelfric not die, and that men and women, along with their families, come to know the reality and truth of Massia. Without that there will be insurrection in the kingdom and, mayhap, wars amongst our kingdoms.'

Balwone bowed his head before the king.

'Your Majesty, we shall pray for the recovering of the priest. We shall also pray against the knavish tricks of those who would be loyal to the gods, but disloyal to you. I am sure that Massia's sword will go well amongst us, and that we will be delivered from the hands of our enemies.'

In that moment he was grateful for the wisdom of Flamgrid, the lowly, but powerful, love of the Shemgridions, and his knowledge that one by one the kingdoms of this world were toppling before the loving, but powerful, onslaught of the Lord Massia.

Paelfric seemed to be in a mood which the knight could not name, for he did not understand it. He sensed it was not a mood of conflict, but a mood of quietness and serenity.

'This night', said the king, 'we shall sup together and afterwards we will call your man, Roget. There are many things we must talk about'.

His eyes were thoughtful as he regarded the prince of Manignia.

'This is a time for action', he said. 'We, too, must seek out the acts we should do. Once, many ages ago, the people of the Most High came to us, even before Massia was born into this world, and we rejected them in order to preserve our religion, our customs and our way of life. They told us there is only one true God, but we did not heed them. It may well be that the Most High is giving us a second visitation, and this time we must not fail his great mercy towards us.'

CHAPTER NINE

Balwone Dines with Royalty and Is Commissioned for a Strange Adventure

ROGET seemed a trifle nervous when told the king would summon him in the late evening, but Balwone assured him the call was for good and not for ill. Roget's black eyes shone, and his fine figure straightened until his jacket almost burst. Then tears came to his eyes.

'Old Roget', he said, 'the man who was without hope. How the Most High has had mercy on him who was not even his servant'.

Balwone clapped him on the back. 'That old Roget has gone for ever, and a new has come. He is my companion in all weathers, as are Ballia and Morna. Together we will fulfil what the Most High has written for us in his book of wisdom.'

Roget seemed pleased at that, and his emotions were calmed. 'I will await the summons', he said with some dignity.

'First', Balwone said, 'I dine with the king, and afterwards he wishes you to be present in a conference. He will call for you'.

The royal dining hall was furnished with a long table of old oak which shone from much polishing. Also gleaming were the great bowls of fruit and nuts placed at appropriate points. The prepared food was on silver platters: whole chicken, ducks and pheasants and a pig with its head and eyes complete. There were also delicacies that gourmets would highly covet. The sturdy oak table did not

groan with the things laden upon it, but there was food beyond imagination.

According to the custom of the day, guests sat on benches or wide, square stools; but here, great chairs, new to the northern kingdoms, offered dignity and comfort to the royalty who would feast.

Balwone had dressed appropriately for the occasion with long jacket, knee breeches, brilliant hose and shining shoes—all the height of fashion in the kingdom. The invitation was an official one to the Manignian prince and, as was fitting, the queen was present. Long ago Balwone had known of the marriage of Zenli, Paelfric's son, to Clanlo the daughter of the king of Flagland. These two were also present, and Balwone perceived that whilst the queen, Paelmin by name, was an aged and timorous woman, Zenli and Clanlo were persons of high intelligence and strong character. They impressed Balwone deeply. For his part, he was keeping sensible silence, not obtruding into the family discussions, yet being ready for questions which might be addressed to him.

There were such questions, and it soon transpired that the arrangement of the meal was in the nature of a conference, and that the king had planned to dispense with the servants. These had set out plates before the royal family and Balwone. The silver goblets were filled with red wine, but when all the food was laid, the great high doors of the hall were closed and bolted, and the meal proceeded. The conversation was only for royal ears.

They asked many questions, and primarily about the deity called 'the Most High', about Massia and his entrance into this world, his life, death, departure and exaltation to the right hand of the Most High, the place of reigning honour. Probably the answers Balwone gave were not new; they must have known much, but it seemed they needed some kind of reassurance regarding the reason for the faith which some nations had placed in Massia and the Most High.

As the discussion developed, interest in the eating diminished. Balwone was aware that the future of Cathrid in some way depended upon the outcome of the royal conference. The queen seemed little interested, but Prince Zenli and the Princess Clanlo

were quite attentive to the prince of Manignia, and Paelfric seemed to be deeply moved.

'Behind the worship of the old fertility and war gods', Paelfric said, 'is knowledge of the Most High. Sometimes the old gods seem to defer to him, sometimes they go their own ways, as yet do rebellious children. Why is it that they do not acknowledge the Most High to us, their devotees?'

'Ah!' said Balwone. 'I pondered that question for many a year. The true sages gave honour to him, but, according to their age and customs, they sought to teach the wisdom that comes from the gods. In every man there is the image of the Most High, the one who made the universe. That image is not clear, but it is there, for the Most High is the creator. He has traffic of a kind with all men and women. Deep down in their spirits he is present to them.'

'Why, then', said Zenli, 'do they not give him prior place?'

'They seek', said Balwone, 'to cast out every memory of him, but within them is a thrust to retain him, and to know him. All men must worship, and what they worship determines the nature and outcome of their lives.'

Zenli exchanged looks with the king. 'Thus, Father, you have said. Idolatry degrades, since it denies the truth within a man.'

Paelfric agreed. 'This Most High One has always been at once the bane and the desire of man, who must somehow kill the Most High, or his worship of the gods will be fraught with strange guilts which never let him rest.'

He turned to Balwone. 'You believe, then, that the Most High is with every man, and does not desert him even though man, for his part, rejects this true God.'

Balwone bowed his assent. 'In faith, I am sure that every man cannot exist outside this Deity. How often have the sages taught us that. It is just that men and nations desire coexistence with the Most High as well as their gods.'

Zenli gently thumped the table. 'It is what I say continually. It is better for us either to assure the gods we are one only with them or we must decide alone for this Most High. What, then, Balwone, is your claim for this Most High? Why should we worship him alone, and thus reject the ancient idols and lords?'

‘It is because the gods cannot offer us true fullness in our worship, they cannot inspire to teach us the way of true love and they can give no assurance beyond the grave that we shall live in other than dark shades, or, mayhap, not live at all.’

Clanlo nodded her head in full agreement. ‘Men have ever sought war as their great occupation and entertainment. They give it noble airs which do not belong to it. Every human craves love, but of true love the gods know nothing. Of passion they know much, but these passions eat at the spirit of a person, and somewhat defame and even demean him.’

Balwone sat as though in a dream. His experience of a death of his spirit, following his hours on the Holy Mountain, had shown him that life lies only in Massia. At the same time, he knew of the need of men and women to worship—worship something—for he himself knew the excitement and passion that love of a person, a thing, or an ambition can bring both delight and pain to the worshipper.

As he sat, his heart rejoiced in him. Cathrid was a nation which could defy the old gods, given Aelfric’s restoration to life and an intention to reject the old gods in favour of the Most High. It seemed to him that the king, his son Zenli and his daughter-in-law Clanlo were in favour of the decease of the old deities and the acceptance of the Most High and Massia his servant.

The party seemed, for a short time, to lapse into silence. Paelfric, looking at the meal, urged his guests to eat well. The supply was far beyond their capacity to eat, and they smiled, but concentrated on the good things. Balwone thought he was not only in a place of plenty, so far as food was concerned, but also as far as progress was his in proclaiming the nature of the Most High and Massia.

It was the queen who next spoke. He had thought her to be old, tired and timid, but she seemed to have a surge of new life as she made her observations.

‘It is a strange thing you tell us, Prince Balwone’, she said, ‘that the Most High has traffic with all persons, no matter what

the colour of their skin, the degree of nobility or savagery, the religion they hold and the gods they worship’.

Balwone nodded his assent. ‘That is so’, he said.

‘I think it a matter of great wonderment’, she said, ‘and it is so far from general thinking that it is difficult to believe’. She raised a hand as Balwone was about to explain the case.

‘I welcome this wonderful idea’, she said, ‘for it greatly warms my heart. I can see, however, that to worship the Most High may lead to the destruction of our kingdom. Unless you get people to see your Most High, the people will remain divided between the old and the new gods’.

‘Your Highness’, said Balwone, ‘the Most High was before all gods, and will ever be when they are destroyed. Some of us call him ageless, for things in this world age and perish, but not so the Most High. He is eternal’.

‘I do not know that word “eternal”’, the Queen said. ‘You must explain it to me.’

‘Eternal means the true God existed before time as we know it, and will be forever. He never ages or perishes.’

The large eyes of the Queen were fixed upon Balwone. He sensed her growing wonder.

‘We need not fear the destruction of Cathrid’, said Balwone, ‘but rather we must think of it as a kingdom renewed. Massia as its Lord will show the Most High as love’.

Queen Paelmin looked at her husband, the king.

‘Should we not then encourage this servant of Massia?’ she asked. ‘Should we not open our kingdom to the great love of Massia?’

The knight of Manignia sensed the agreement of all. He held up his hand as though requesting permission for an audience. The king bowed his sanction.

Balwone began his discourse, the discourse that was to seal the mind of all present.

‘All men in this world desire love. They often demean true love, or seek to take advantage of it, but at heart all long for love. So high, splendid and wonderful is this love that the human race cannot believe the truth of it. For that reason the Most High sent his servant Massia into the world to explain and reveal that love.’

Even now I feel my inability to bring that love to you, not just as a great idea or a high ideal, but as it is the power of the Most High. For this reason I make a request of His Majesty and Her Majesty, and you Prince Zenli with your dear wife Princess Clanlo.

‘A song has been given me which brought me to see the love of the Most High and his beloved Massia. With your permission I would fain sing it, though my singing may be, itself, but an unworthy thing.’

The four nodded their dignified agreement. It was a strange thing, indeed, which Balwone sought to do, but he felt a tide rising in his spirit, and he would have been hard put to restrain the song which had come to him in past and present days, and which was something sealed into him from the night he listened to the singing of Nappali. Much as he wished to have his instrument to accompany him, Balwone stood and lifted his voice, which was already resonant with the joy that he felt.

The royal four had never heard singing like this. Balwone had said little to convince them about the Most High and Massia, but now he was singing a song which was a saga, a narrative telling of the inner misery of man, and of the loving servant of the Most High who had come to reveal his Lord. This he had done continually, both by his manner of living, and then his manner of dying. Of the meaning and mode of that dying, Balwone brought to his hearers in a special song of interpretation.

The two couples listened with surprise which developed into astonishment. It was as though Massia was there, before them in this dining room of the palace. No one was more surprised than Balwone, that he had offered to sing. Afterwards he knew that somehow the discussion between them had been on the basis of the merits of the Most High and Massia, and he had been unable to argue a case. Indeed to argue it would have been wrong. Somehow he had to break open this mystery of the ages, and simply could not plead or discuss the matter. Even as he sang his mind went back to the night when Nappali had told of the grand mystery. He remembered how it had gripped his own heart, inescapably.

When he had finished singing he knew that what he had done had been incongruous with the banquet to which he had been invited.

However, he could not have been more wrong. The large, liquid brown eyes of the queen were brimming with tears, and Clanlo’s shone as when moonlight is on a placid stream. Both Paelfric and Zenli were deeply moved, and Zenli stood and gripped the two hands of the Manignian prince.

Paelfric was the first to speak. ‘Balwone, our dear friend. You have told us a story tonight in song that we never expected to hear even from one of our great tellers of tales. We had not known you were so gifted a singer, but what you tell us comes from your heart, and it is our hearts which have been moved as never before. I am sure we have been in thrall to your God for some time, but now we are convinced by your unusual way of giving testimony to your faith.’

Paelfric, who had risen from his chair to speak, now looked at his family, and then reseated himself. Balwone saw that he was trembling, and that somehow some of his strength had deserted him.

‘Balwone, son of Facius and Merphein, you have without doubt convinced us that we must seek the conversion of our kingdom. That is why we called you tonight, as though the conclusion of our discussions were already foregone. We had some sort of a plan in mind, and that was to tell our people that we seek this Most High, this One of love, rather than hold loyalty to our traditional gods.

‘Such a change will not be easy. Even within our Council of the Lords there are those who have spoken harshly against the Shemgridions, and who fear our ancient way of life will be destroyed, and that our people will be confused, and so it will be a time for disturbers of the peace to take advantage of the hour and seize the reins of the kingdom.’

He paused and gestured towards his son. ‘Prince Zenli, here, has long been convinced that this change must come. I am proud of him as my certain successor. Indeed, he is the real ruler even

at this moment, but he sees danger ahead if we do not change our ways of living.'

Zenli's eyes told of his affection for his father, and his desire to bring changes to the kingdom. He simply affirmed by his looks the matters his father was making known to Balwone.

'I mind', continued the king, 'the dreadful havoc the Zagon of Manignia made in the days when I was but a fledgling king. In memory we have not recovered from the weakness which allowed him to rape our domain, even to Endomin, although our lords and nobles, and most of our women, escaped.

'We had a great respect for the youthful sage Flamgrid, whom we know became your own teacher. We have often spoken of the friendliness which would come between our northern kingdoms, instead of the constant fear we have of another incursion of the Manigs, and other such conquering peoples.

'Even so, the change from worshipping the gods which are common to our region, and turning to the Most High, will need great understanding and sympathy. We are not idol destroyers by nature, and it may cause great distress unless the changes come about through gentle transition.

'For this reason we had planned that at the Festival of the Change of Seasons, when we ask the gods to see us through the harsh winter and give us a fresh awakening in the Spring, a Summer of great growth and a Winter of fruitfulness, you come to us, filled with knowledge of the changes other kingdoms have known in the North and the South, and so call our people to new ways of life, new wisdom, and this profound element which you call love. If you would come with Roget, some of your Shemgridions and at least one of our own, then the great change could take place at the coming Festival.'

Zenli took up his father's words. 'It has come to us, Prince Balwone, that many are already prepared for change. Your person has become famed for what you have done at the tournaments; the ways in which you have sought peace; and the wisdom which has been given you. Were Aelfric the priest of the gods to recover, and were he to espouse the Most High and Massia, then the kingdoms might come to your cause.'

* * *

Balwone was flooded with joy, with gratitude and with love for the royal leaders of Cathrid. Here was the occasion that Massia had built for him to proclaim good news to the nations. He could scarcely contain his pleasure and delight, and indeed it showed plainly on his countenance.

'I am indeed among dear friends', he said. 'I have a sense that all this is from Massia, and we must obey his will. Yes, I gladly accede to your wishes and the plans for peace that you have made. We will trust that, in the time of our travelling, Roget and I and some friends may so gather a harvest of love and peace that we may come back to see the conversion of your kingdom.'

Paelfric lifted a hand, as though to interrupt the Prince of Manignia.

'Balwone the Great', he said, 'we have discussed the matter of your esquire Roget. We think he is a man destined to help us in this venture by staying in Cathrid, by watching over the Shemgridions, and guarding them until the day of your return. Simple as is this man, and untutored in letters, he is nevertheless a man of great perception, and he could teach the Shemgridions that wisdom which will bring them to the festival as ambassadors for the Most High and for Massia'.

Balwone was stunned. He could not visualise life without this beloved henchman, and a spasm of agony touched his heart. Months of travel without his esquire seemed impossible. At the same time, he knew how valuable he would prove in shaping the Shemgridions to come with joy and love and peace to a kingdom soon to be shaken by the spiritual warfare that occurs when the old gods are being rejected, and the manners of a people are being changed.

In himself he marvelled at how this once dark murderer had changed into a person of nobility, of steadfastness of person, and now as a rough but sturdy shepherd of people whom the world would destroy. He knew that Massia was the unseen, though not unfelt, Shepherd of human history, and that Roget could be considered an under-shepherd, strong in limb and heart, but gentle in spirit as any Shemgridion lamb.

With a pang, the great knight surrendered his closest friend to Cathrid and to the Shemgridions, marvelling in the same moment at the perception of the royal family.

Balwone stood and crossed to where the king was seated at the table. The king swivelled his chair to meet the knight, and Balwone knelt at the feet of the monarch.

‘In the name of Massia’, he said, ‘I yield my henchman to you for these months ahead. I also yield myself for my journey to the kingdoms that already have pledged their loyalty to their beloved monarch Massia. Human bonds mean nothing in the face of Massia, but through him they are beautified and given meaning beyond all other bonds. I pledge myself this night to be Massia’s henchman, unto death’.

The king rose, deeply moved. Likewise the Prince Zenli, then the queen and with them, Princess Clanlo. They were, all five, strangely silent, yet marvellously one. They stood with bowed heads.

The king took hold of his silver goblet, and, as though comprehending his act, so did the others of the royal family.

Paelfric raised his vessel, and the wine within was as deeply red as blood that flows in human veins.

‘We drink a stirrup cup to you, O Balwone of Manignia. Go, man of peace, and bring peace with you when you come. Bring the peace of the Most High into all hearts, and to all nations of this world.’

Still bowed in head but weeping in heart, Balwone felt the stirrup cup was a benediction upon his spirit.

CHAPTER TEN

Balwone Is Given a Vision of Massia, and Aelfric Collenthribben Is Saved from Dying

PRINCE Zenli accompanied Balwone to his room, to see him to his night’s rest, but the Prince of Manignia was too restless in his spirit to sleep immediately. Knowing he would toss on his bed, and spend the night with so many strange thoughts concerning the future, he begged Zenli to take him into the night, to a place where he could meditate.

Zenli bowed his head in agreement. The two wended their way down a back staircase, and emerged into a garden which was already dappled with the silver of moonlight, and fragrant with the scents of night flowers.

Zenli led him to the edge of a lake, the surface of which was broken with silver glistenings and tremors and lappings of tiny waves. There was a strong stone bench, built with a support for one who would lean back, white also in the moonlight, and Zenli bade him be seated. He, himself, remained standing.

‘I must go’, he said. ‘We will talk to your servant Roget, and request him to care for the Shemgridions and teach them those ways which will win the hearts of our people to the Most High through the blessed Massia.’

When he was gone, Balwone rested, his eyes staring peacefully at the lake, his spirit serene, and his head filled with notions of things to come. In this posture of his being he sat, thoughts passing through his mind as a peaceful cavalcade, and his heart

filled with prophetic anticipations. Memories of similar joyful emotions came to him, and the horror he had known in discovering his own perfidy of heart seemed erased for ever.

‘Such peace!’ he murmured to himself, and peace it was, but peace given for the event which was to follow, which even now was breaking in upon him.

Watching the cavalcade of his memories, he had slowly wearied until he was asleep, his arms still stretched wide along the back support of the stone bench, his eyes closed to the gentle dazzling of the rippling water. Somewhere a nightingale was singing with its lilting melody, perhaps heard as the prince gently drifted into slumber. His tired body was eased as though by a pleasant narcotic.

How long he slept he knew not, nor was he aware of whether or not he was still asleep or had awakened from a dream to see a vision before him. His old reaction of expecting the visitation of a dragon, a giant or a temptress of entrancing beauty, was not present.

He had never seen Massia, though often he had felt his presence, and had heard words uttered to him by the great Prince of Peace, the utterances being in his mind and heart, though not into his ears. He knew that the man of his vision was most certainly Massia of the Most High, and his whole being was overpowered by a great yearning to love all things of the creation. That he loved Massia was clear to him, and in the sight of Massia all sins and passions of the past were as nothing in comparison to this great love which was engulfing him.

The silver of moonlight was replaced by a great light which shone through all the sky, making it so brilliant a blaze that Balwone thought he might be blinded. Far from this being the case, the gaze of the man of Manignia seemed to see into all history from its ancient beginnings to the days in which he was now living. The purpose and the plan of the Most High came to him with a clarity wrought of this effulgence of glory. He stood in awe, his hands upraised in worship to the great King who appeared to be God and Man in one Being, not that Balwone saw a human appearance. The light was too brilliant to discern a form.

Perhaps an image was not for him to carry in his memory, yet he knew the light was him—Massia.

Songs he had never sung; lyrics he had never dreamed; worship he had never known; all gripped him, and his spirit soared to this beloved One.

‘Oh, Massia!’ he cried, as one does who is taken out of himself, and brought into unspeakable rapture.

‘Oh, Massia!’ he kept saying. ‘Oh, Massia!’

In his heart love rioted. In that moment he knew, beyond even what he had hitherto known, the true meaning of love, and indeed the essential nature of all things. The complete unity excluded all that was evil. In a way this evil had no true existence, and in a moment of revelation the prince knew that ultimately evil forces and powers could not triumph. Massia had all the world in his hand, and resistance to him could not finally succeed. It came to Balwone in a flash of liberating understanding that the conquest of the northern kingdoms would not be an impossible venture. Massia must be crowned Lord of all.

As Balwone heard the voice of his Master, it was like the shirring of waters by a great wind, the cry of the deep echoing along vast oceans—the sound of many waters. It sent a thrill through the knight, so that he felt almost breathless. He gasped for the sheer wonder of it, and he had in that moment a fresh view of the substantial nature of true life. Life had always seemed so passing, so insubstantial. The truth of its reality, and the reality of immortality, gave him great joy.

The voice of Massia came to him, not only to his ears, but also to his heart, though the words were formed in his mind and set imperishable ideas.

‘Beloved son of Facius and Merphein, look at the nations and rejoice, for the light they have so long rejected will shine upon them, and they shall live.

‘The ancient gods are the inventions of human minds, and they cannot outlast that which is eternal, the creation of the Most High.

‘Take heart, for I am sending you to kings and governors and their councils to bear the message of their liberation. The gods

and lords and idols are cruel, aping the beauties and the wonders of High Heaven, but having no true being of their own. Such shall dissolve before the truth of the Most High. You need have no fear of them.

‘Fear not the anger of those who shall rise against you, for their hatred is not for you but for me. Long ago I prevailed over them all, when I revealed the love of Massia to them.

‘Go, then, and fear none. Be at peace in our love, child of the Most High.’

The high light faded, and the moon shone in its placid strength. He saw a flurry of ducks on the now still waters. Something must have flushed them out of their resting place. They seemed to flow, heads up, but silent. He saw a fish or an eel leap above the waters and subside. Somewhere a blackbird was serenading its mate in wistful, throbbing tones, to be answered by a similar echoing sweetness.

The goblet of love, joy and peace was full for Balwone. Time flowed unnoticed by the prince. Massia’s words kept echoing in his mind until the song of the blackbird was one with his own. Coolness seeped into his spirit and it was calmed. In the ancient writings he had read of such peace of heart, and now he was knowing, even beyond all he had known.

After a time, he made his way to the castle, nodded to a group of guardsmen who were lolling around a fire, one of whom let him into the castle and led him to his room, as Zenli had commanded him previously.

Some of the ecstasy remained in the prince, but it was the certainty of knowing that his vocation was truly ordered by the Most High, and that he had just been commissioned and ordained by Massia, that let him slip into a dreamless sleep.

Once, during the night, he awoke and a voice was saying to him, ‘Consider, Balwone of Manignia, that just as dragons are the devising of our own hearts, our own anger and evil, so likewise is this Massia, whom you think to be a real personage. Is he not but the making of your own thoughts, your own aspirations and the deceiving of yourself that there is a god of love? Massia is not real, nor is his Most High. They are both sievings of the

deepest part of human hearts. You invent such, so that cynicism and despair do not grip you and bring you into dreadful accidie’.

Balwone did not immediately reject the voice that came to him. So often had accidie, with its torpor, meaninglessness and emptiness, gripped him, that he saw the logic of the reasoning.

Then he said to himself, with great joy and with contempt for the cunning suggestion of the voice. ‘Ho! Ho! Could I then evoke from my own heart the glory I saw this night, the majesty and splendour of that high vision? If man can do thus from the depths of his heart, then what is there that he cannot do?’

As he lay, the peace of Massia stole back to lighten his mind and give him comfort in the depths.

‘Thou art a sly one, whoever thou art’, he said, slipping back into the ancient way of speaking such as Roget always used. ‘Thou art indeed a sly fellow, but begone. I will have none of this, unholy companion of dragons and giants and delusive spirits. What I have seen, I have seen! None can take this from me.’

He lay, undisturbed in his own spirit, marvelling that the vision of Massia had finally conquered the pangs of accusing creatures. In saying, ‘None can take this from me’, he had overcome the guilt which in former times had often unsettled him.

Saying and thinking these things, he resumed his sleep of peace.

During his sleep, which was wholly peaceful, he had no dreams until near morning. Through the narrow mullioned windows a moon, no longer strong in its shining, but pale and soft, as though it had given of its best, was now fading as the dawn was taking over. It was a gentle disk, eking out its last hour, but it was in its light that he rose from his bed of rushes and stood looking at the beautiful estate below him. He stared gratefully at the garden by the lake, in which Massia had appeared to him.

Suddenly, without warning, a great ache and yearning welled up in him. To his memory came the life he had lived with his beloved parents, Facius and Merphein, in such a castle as this. Old *Zagonholme* with its turreted towers, its ramparts, its moats and its rolling fields and farms seemed to be before his eyes. The

years lived there seemed to run together like a scroll unfolding with all the incidents of his life vividly sketched before him. His had been a pleasurable childhood, and he had felt secure in the love of his serene parents. He remembered the death of his father, and the growing old of his mother, and, then, at the last, his painful farewells to her as he had set out for the Holy Mountain. He had known that day he would not see her again, and she had not lived to know his failure at the Mountain of the golden egg.

In that hour before dawn when all things are vulnerable, and most of all, the human spirit, he wept for the sweet memories which flowed in upon him. Some, of course, were not sweet. There were memories of times of tempest within his heart when, in the days of his youth, he had been trained in the school of chivalry. Reminders of errant times shamed him, even now, so sensitive was this man whose life had centred about love. Then, before his eyes, a dark knight appeared abruptly, a man with cruel eyes who had once jousting with him. It was Kanavah, a knight from the kingdom of Miridon, who had plainly planned to kill him.

There were other, much sweeter remembrances, such as of Merom and Gothlic, the only two women apart from his mother whom he had loved, and even as he was thinking, Merphein appeared before him. He knew not whether it was in a vision or some strange but wondrous dream, as waited for the coming dawn.

There were the soft outlines of this beautiful woman. He saw afresh the eyes of deep violet, and they were upon him. He heard a voice, as gentle as a dawn whisper when the night air rises in its coolth to meeting the coming day.

‘Dear Balwone! Dear Balwone!’ she said, and his heart was near to breaking, for Massia’s love flooded him afresh as he saw and heard her, the source of his youthful love.

‘Dear Mother! Beloved Merphein!’ he said, and he thought his heart would break, yet its ache was sweet and filled with a rare tranquillity. ‘Why could I not have been with thee in the hour of thy death, as thou wast lonely without thy husband and thy son?’

‘There was no loneliness, Balwone’, she said. ‘Massia came to me and guided my steps with comfort to the place of his eternal love.’

Again, memory flooded over him, this time without pain for his failure at the Holy Mountain. ‘I failed thee and our dear Massia’, he said. ‘I failed on the Holy Mountain.’

There was a quiet bowing of her head, and affirmation of what he spoke as being true, but her voice held no accusation.

‘Massia was with thee’, she said, ‘even as thou slew the guardian of the golden egg. It was thyself thou slew, and, because of the new Balwone, thy old self didst die, and thy new self now gazes at me with a love beyond the old of those past days. Go, then, my beloved son and never rest until your world knows the love that has visited it from on High’.

He knew he could not hold her, and was not pained by the grief which rose from within him, a grief he had never poured out in tears for her passing. He wept for the loveliness of her life and passing, and when he raised his eyes from the bout of tears she was gone, as he knew the transient vision of her would have to go. For him there was no pain of separation, but a cleansing of the pain that had been.

He felt no desire to return to the family home, *Zagonholme*, but his memories were clean, and his heart pure, and his determination to follow the will of the Most High strengthened. He was wholly free to do the blessed will of Massia and the Most High. With double delight for the visions of Massia and Merphein, he immediately fell asleep on his rush mattress.

He and Roget broke fast together, his esquire having brought a cooked cereal and herbal tea to him. Roget was agog with the commission the king had given him. Balwone explained to Roget that being his servant had helped him to regain the dignity lost for many years through his cruel master Edwin Corsini of Flagland.

‘Of a truth, master’, he said, ‘the King Paelfric had sought out in me something I had never dared to dream would be mine, the gift of encouragement and leadership for such as the Shemgridions. The people are men and women of humble spirit and gentleness and purity. Who am I to so help to lead them?’

He shook his great head, and his black eyes softened until they were dark pools of tender affection.

'Bless thee, Prince Balwone', he said suddenly, shaking the tears out of his eyes. 'Thou art ever the man of love who hast brought me far from my days of death and despair!'

As they journeyed along the road, they had much to discuss. Roget sought counsel of the knight as to what he should do when preparing the Shemgridions for the day of the Festival of the Change of Seasons, or Festival of the Seasons as it was locally called.

'I hear, Master, that there is great festivity, feasting and fairs, and tournaments in which knights come from afar to share. How shall we fare in such high festivity?'

Balwone told him of the vision of Massia which had visited him during the night, by the lake. Roget's eyes gleamed, and he raised his hands in joy. Then he slapped his quiet mount who did not take fright.

'It is good, Master!' he cried. 'It is good that we have this word from the great Massia himself. Now we shall be content to be at one with him. We have naught to fear.'

The day about them was flooded with golden sunshine. As they entered the forest there was a shrill singing of cicadas and other insects. Above this chorus was the symphony of the birds, not out of harmony with the rest, but adding to it richer notes of harmonic beauty. Large butterflies of blue and gold and black fluttered above them. Swifts and swallows dived and swooped to have their fill of the gnats and midges that attended the horses and their riders. All nature seemed in high spirits. So the men talked until they reached the village of the Shemgridions.

They were met first of all by Morna the great mastiff. He bounded ahead of the welcoming party of the Shemgridions. The tall one, Shemmashin, saluted them with dignity. He looked up at Balwone.

'Praise be to the Most High that he has delivered you from peril, and brought you amongst us again.'

'We have many good things to say', said Balwone, 'but tell me of Aelfric Collenthribben. How fares this wounded one?'

'He is making progress', the tall man said. 'He is healing. Our medicines are bringing him back to life, and it seems he is at peace in his spirit. It may be that at night old spirits of the gods, maybe even the red dragon, visit him, and he has shakings and cryings, but when he wakes he is at peace. You will find a great difference in him Prince Balwone.'

'So soon!' said the prince in delight. 'We would fain see this old priest and sorcerer.'

Balwone watched Morna and Roget express their mutual joy of reunion. The knight had been pondering whether to take Morna with him on his journeys. Seeing their delight he was still uncertain. Roget had always cared for the animal, but then he anticipated having a party of Shemgridions to be with him on his travels. They would care for the hound that Sophius the son of Pirinus had once given to him. This hound, like Ballia his white stallion, had unusual gifts of perception and prescience. Their discernment of men and supernatural spirits was rare to find present in either men or animals. For the moment he dallied with decision-making. Events would lead him to a true resolution of Massia's will in the matter.

When they reached the village, Shemmashin took him to the hut in which Aelfric Collenthribben lay.

It was difficult for Balwone to recognise the man lying on his bed of rushes and leaves. More so, because the old priest was asleep, and in sleep he seemed to be greatly at peace. Balwone peered more closely, and as he did the eyes of the sage of the gods opened, and Balwone recognised the peace this man possessed. It was such as he had known under the love of the Most High.

For a moment or two the priest blinked and then a smile slowly came to his face.

'My saviour, Prince Balwone', said the man, and his voice was gentle.

Balwone was deeply moved. He lowered himself to be nearer the sage, squatting, resting on his thighs.

'It is indeed good to see you now healing', he said.

The patient lay still, saying nothing for a while. Both men looked with discerning spirit into each other's eyes. Then Balwone laid his hand upon the left arm of the priest.

'This is a miracle of Massia', he said, wondering as he did, what the reaction or response would be from the man.

There was what Balwone described, later, as 'a wise smile'.

'Our friends the Shemgridions have been most helpful', he said. 'Their healing physics are as mine, and no less. So soon my wounds and bruises are no less curative. I am indeed grateful.' He smiled faintly. 'I am grateful to them, as to you whom I would have happily destroyed.'

Balwone again marvelled at his restoration. He saw a man before him who was without hate, venom and evil. It came to him that the miracle of change within the man was of a high order. Also the priest had gathered up dignity with his healing. The prince discerned that he was a sage without evil, and he thought that Flamgrid and this man had much to exchange, much to discuss. For a moment the idea of bringing them together came to him, but he dismissed it as too difficult. Perhaps later they could talk.

Aelfric Collenthribben felt the reassuring touch of the prince upon him and felt warmed.

'We have much to say to one another', he said, 'but time will first have to heal me of this weakness'.

Balwone's last impression of the man was that he did not look old as heretofore, but seemed to have slipped off the burden of years, and was tolerably young again. He shook his head, not in unbelief, but in joy, nodded to the sage, stood and, with his friends, made his way from the hut.

'This man', he said to Shemmashin, 'is no longer an enemy of our Lord. I doubt not but that he will prove himself a doughty warrior against his former allies'.

'This is a miracle', said the tall Shemgridion. He lifted his eyes, staring upwards. 'No doubt it is the mighty will of him', he said, and Balwone knew what he meant.

The community came together for the midday breaking of the fast. The elders sat with Balwone and Roget, and discussed the

wonderful news that the two men had brought. The knight noticed the tears in most eyes, and the joy that had come to them.

When he spoke of Paelfric's appointment of Roget to help them in the new works of witnessing to the people of Cathrid, the elders' joy knew no bounds. They were humble enough to know that this rough man of Massia would certainly aid them in their new way of life, in being one with the people to whom they would go.

They also agreed with the plan for Balwone to take a group of men with him on his journeys. Shemmashin opined that women should also go, those who were older and yet not old, those whose children were so grown they could live without the presence of their parents.

Balwone felt drowsy after the meal and sought a time of rest and quietness. Roget declined to take a rest. His last words to his master before he left were, 'Without doubt thou must take Morna with thee. It may be his last journey and he will have great joy in serving his prince'.

The prince thanked Roget, and feeling at peace he was immediately asleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Setting Out for the Uppermost Northern Kingdoms

EARLY next morning a posse of men arrived from King Paelfric. They had messages from the king and his son Prince Zenli, and documents of passage for Balwone and his party to pass through the northern kingdoms and be certified to the other kingdoms—the upper northern kingdoms—which had come under Massia and his teachings. The Shemgridions were counted as citizens of Cathrid, and when, later, this information was intimated to the band of men of Balwone's party, they showed their delight.

Balwone and Roget were breaking their fast when the king's messengers brought their papers, and after Balwone received them they were led away by three of the village elders to also break their fast. The tall Shemgridion, Shemmashin, approached the prince and his esquire as they sat at a table, being attended by the women, wives of the elders.

'Prince Balwone', he said, 'we elders have decided that it would be best for you to go without women and children for they will greatly impede the speed of your going and your coming. If you are to return by the time of the Festival of the Seasons, then your going must be with haste. That you may travel with dispatch we have chosen ten good men, and will horse them from the few mounts we possess. As you know, the nations who have not yet received Massia are called the Northern Kingdoms, and this is a proverb in the mouths of those who dwell to the south of us. There are, however, three kingdoms to the north, north-west and

north-east of us. We call them the Upper Kingdoms of the North. Their kingdoms are fastnesses which would-be conquerors have found most difficult to reach, let alone overcome, and the Most High has them in his hand. As in the south so in the extremes of the north there are kingdoms that espouse Massia: they are under his hand. This, therefore, must be the plan of your going and your coming, but it is for you to choose'.

Shemmashin unrolled a parchment document which was a map.

'Your going must be west and then north-west through Zed and Miridon to the three kingdoms of Massia. They are, as you will know, those named Mantria, Frimpone and Cautria, for they retain the names which were theirs before the coming of Massia. However, should you choose to avoid Zed, then you can travel east through Manignia and swing to the north to Cautria. Thus you would proceed through Frimpone and Mantria and return through Miridon and Zed.

'You will know, then', said the tall man, 'that great forests divide these kingdoms from the ones wherein you have travelled. Our men know the way through these forests and will guide you. Between Cathrid and Frimpone, as also between Zed and Frimpone, there are high mountains which ever remain under ice and snow, making it necessary for you to go by way of Miridon or Manignia. Reaching either Mantria or Cautria you may be led by our brethren to Frimpone then Cautria or Mantria, according to the route you will have taken. Thus you will traverse all kingdoms'.

Balwone and Roget decided they should take leave of each other in the privacy of their hut. Roget had put together in two large bundles all the needed equipment of his master. In one sack was the armour of the prince who was to travel without it, or side arms. He was to be dressed in those garments which would make his travelling most comfortable.

At one time it seemed the knight's esquire could not bear the parting. With his piercing black eyes, he looked up at the knight and said, 'Master, would that I could go with thee. How sweet and how strong were our many conversings. I drank of thy

wisdom and the wisdom of Flamgrid, and many happy times we had in discussing thy great call, and then the sadness of thy fall. Even so, they were great days, and the memory of them will never leave me’.

Balwone perceived there were tears in the eyes of the rough, dark giant, and he, too, was strangely moved in his own heart.

‘But for you, Roget’, he said, ‘I might never have recovered from those dark days in the forest of Allein, and the unusual events surrounding the death of the guardian of the golden egg of love. Now, Roget, you must train these men and women in those ways of the world they do not know, that they may go out as ambassadors of Massia, for that he has chosen them to be’.

‘Of a truth’, replied the esquire, ‘they are more versed in the ways of life than are we, but they are babes in evil, and that is their reward for simplicity. I know not what I, who was once an old murderer, can teach them, but, doubtless, Paelfric knows what he is about in setting me amongst them in the time of thy travels’.

‘Doubtless’, agreed Balwone, ‘and Massia will supply you with all wisdom that they may know the ways and wiles of men of the world. Of a surety they also will teach you the deeps of the wisdom of the Most High, even beyond that which we ever knew.’

‘And now, oh man beloved, we must take our parting here, and not in the assembly of the village’.

The two embraced with fervour and awkwardness, and Roget turned to complete the packing of Balwone’s gear. As he was doing so he half turned, looking up at Balwone.

‘Master’, he said, ‘thy hound Morna must not be forgotten. He will be of great help to thee. Apart from Ballia, no animal has such knowledge by nature of that which is good and that which is evil. These two shall be thy near companions’.

Balwone felt a pang for the generosity of his servant. ‘Mayhap, Roget’, he said, ‘that we should divide these gifts of Massia, and you should hold Morna, whilst I take Ballia’.

There was a gleam in the eye of the servant giant. ‘That would suit your esquire well’, he said, ‘but you have need of the hound’.

‘I have ten Shemgridions of noble stature and good minds’, said Balwone. ‘Such may well make for at least one Morna.’

A beautiful smile spread across the cragged face of the huge man, and his eyes misted.

‘I will think well of thee, Master’, he said, ‘and when thou dost reach the forest of Allein, I will trust the Most High, his servant Massia, the ten Shemgridions and Ballia your noble mount, for your wellbeing. Thank you, Master’.

A man of the travelling party came to load the prince’s two sacks on his horse, and the two men walked to the place where the band of travellers was gathered, the large mastiff Morna padding behind them.

The men were not dressed in the simple garments of the Shemgridions, but had chosen a green garb which showed them as neither yeomen nor peasants but, as they said, ‘Free men’. Balwone was pleased with this declaration of their membership of human society. He himself wore darker green which denoted him as being a man of high calling, but not by reason of armour, shield or pennant. The ten men also led a couple of horses to carry equipment, food and water for the band. Having fed on a light meal, the eleven travellers waited for the blessing of Shemmashin before their departure.

The whole of the village had assembled, including the children and some hounds. No sooner had the tall elder invoked a blessing than the assembly broke out into sweet singing. Neither Balwone nor Roget knew the language in which their friends were singing, or, rather, were chanting. It was music fraught with haunting tones, as though, somehow, men and angels were chorusing together. There was nothing of a dirge about it, for, hearing it, Balwone felt his pulse rising. He also was helpless, his body weakening whenever these folk hymned their lyrics, for their chanting was truly enchanting. To his mind came the saying of one of the ancient sages: ‘In the end, at the time of the consummation of all things, there will be only music. All will be music.’

At the last, the singers changed to the common language of the northern kingdom, so that their words were intelligible. This last song was one of farewell, of blessing, of entreaty for their safety and of prayer for their good return. Greatly moved, the horsemen wheeled their mounts, raised their hands in salute and moved out

of the village. Some of the men turned to look back, nodded to those whom they loved, and in a short time were lost in the forest to the eyes of those who had held on to them with longing.

Roget and Balwone had held gaze as long as they could. The dark eyes of the servant gleamed with sorrow and joy mingled. Morna stood high at the side of the old serf of Flagland and talked through his barking. At the bend in the path the two men nodded and the gaze was broken. Roget and the hound continued to watch, but their master had gone from sight.

When out of hearing of their village, the ten Shemgridions began what Balwone termed their 'ballad singing'. They were ten males who sang wonderfully, sometimes in parts, sometimes in unison. Often their songs were rollicking, and they would have actions to suit their humours. Sometimes they sang lyrics which, like all Shemgridion music, were hauntingly beautiful.

It had been decided they would go to Mantria by way of Zed and Miridon, and so they sang as they went. The parchment map was scarcely needed since all knew the way through these two kingdoms. Balwone, reading the map, perceived that once they had travelled through Zed and Miridon they would have to go through the forests of Allein. A flood of memories came to him as they rode. One was of the dark knight Kanavah who twice had jostled with him and twice had been defeated, the first defeats in the life of the proud knight of Miridon. Balwone, grateful for the support of ten strong men, yet felt somewhat troubled about Kanavah who had made himself the enemy of the prince of Manignia. Time and again the tests of Allein emerged from the depths of his memory and shed a shadow across his spirit.

The tall elder, Shemmashin, had told his team of stalwarts that they must get to know their leader, Balwone, and it would be apt for one, or at the most two, to ride with the knight, constantly taking turns. Often forest paths did not permit three mounts abreast, but there were times when they did. According, then, to this plan, one or two men rode with Balwone.

The leader of the group was a man named Shemmalin. He was, in fact, a nephew of the Elder of the Zed Shemgridions who

had been martyred for his beliefs. Shemmalin had a depth of wisdom and knowledge, and, as they rode, Balwone caught snatches of the old wisdom he had learned from Flamgrid. This gave them great pleasure as they made their way through the forest which itself was holding converse through its many birds and insects and animals, having, as it were, a life of its own, but unafraid of this band of men. Balwone knew these men loved the forest and enjoyed the green foliage, the majesty of the forest giants—ancient oaks and elms—as they also had likings for leaves dappled with sunshine, the shafts of sunlight that would often gild them as they rode. The sound of chuckling brooks, the songs of birds and the elegant flighting of large butterflies filled them with warm pleasure.

Balwone shared his faint misgivings concerning Kanavah the knight, and the seemingly impenetrable forest of Allein.

The Shemgridion smiled gently. 'Have no thought of worry, Master Balwone', he said, smiling. 'Much of your forest of Allein was no true forest. It was much in your mind and of your mind. Sometimes our thinking and seeing demand symbols of the mysteries which baffle us. Often the difficulties before us are partly imaginary, though none the less real for all that. Thoughts arise from the depths of us where the conflict is taking place. It also mayhap that the dark prince of evil will raise such fantasies for us, hoping to crush our spirits and dissuade us from true pilgrimage. I think you will find Allein a much more pleasant place.'

When Balwone showed his astonishment, the other rider stretched forward his right hand and touched the prince.

'Think not, Prince Balwone, that I am making light of your former endeavour. It was a trial of dreadful nature, and out of which you have emerged as a true servant of Massia. No, the scenes you saw were real enough, and the enemies you met no creatures of your imagination, but the forms they took were to delude you and subvert your spirit. Massia permitted them for your training, that you might emerge, finally, as a new man.'

Balwone's heart was set to a gentle throbbing. He had thought of the Shemgridions as men of an inherited wisdom, and as observers of teaching given to them, but now he perceived that if they were all as this man Shemmalin, then they were also gifted thinkers. This excited him for he had had many questions, some of which even Flamgrid could not answer, and it seemed he could air them with the leader of the touring team. Laying aside his premonitions of Miridon, Kanavah, the woods of Allein and hostile creatures of many forms, he asked a question for which he had long desired an answer.

'Friend Shemmalin, I would ask of you concerning your knowledge of the beginning. Long have I perceived that human beings desire to know two things, the beginning and the end. Since they live always in the passing present, they have great fears, and even anger, because they were not at the beginning, nor can even know what it was. When they think of the end they are strangely disturbed. What say you, then, of these things?'

'There was a beginning in what men call time', said Shemmalin, 'for the sun and the moon give us the times of day and night, and stars do their courses in the heavens in such regular order. Likewise, the four seasons show themselves, as it were, in the times we need to know them. So, then, we think of a beginning, and in our spirits there are ideas of a goal for time, and an end and a climax. Without such thoughts life would be without form and purpose'.

'Of course', said Balwone, nodding vigorously, and with some delight. 'For many this is how it is.'

'For Massia there has never been a beginning, nor to him will there be an end', said the Shemgridion, 'but before our time began he had planned to create us for himself, and in our end to take us with him beyond our world of space and time and make us creatures of eternity'.

He paused. 'Not that we despise our world, for it, too, will share the joys of immortality.'

He turned to Balwone. 'Can you truly understand a beginning? Could the Most High have a beginning? If so, then he would be as us, even if somewhat beyond what we are. Can you understand an end? If so, would it be an end to the Most High?'

'The wise men have written', said Balwone, 'that the Most High is the Beginning and the End. He is the First and the Last. Does this not make him, in some sense, as us, even if beyond us?'

Shemmalin smiled. 'The Most High is not the beginning of himself, but the beginning of us, and our time. He is not the End of himself, but the end of us, and for us. That is why he is the First and the Last, but for us.'

Balwone puzzled. 'This is great wisdom', he said, 'but beyond all that I have heard. How can creatures of time become those of eternity?'

'It is already written in their hearts', said Shemmalin. 'You know, O man of God, that that is so. Nothing in this world with all its beauty and delight can equal what you think in your heart, the vision that never allows you to be wholly satisfied with all you see and know. In this sense you have a knowledge of sharing all that is eternal.'

Balwone was amazed and rode silently, pondering the astonishing nature of the revelation. His mind came back to what the Shemgridion had said, and he reminded him of it.

'You said, Shemmalin, that the Most High created us to be eternal.'

Shemmalin shook his head vigorously. 'Nay! Nay! He did not create us to make us eternal, but to give to us the gift of immortality. By creation we are not immortal, for only he is that. But he gives to us immortality so that we shall not perish like the beasts and be no more.'

'What of those that receive him not and his immortality gift?' said Balwone.

Shemmalin pursed his lips and looked sad. 'Fortunately these are but few, yet they shall not perish as the beasts. They will not cease to exist, but their existence will be without the richness of immortal life. Tartarus is their final haven, but a miserable one it will be, for there they do not behold, with joy, the face of the Most High.'

Again Balwone found himself speechless. He had known fragments of what Shemmalin had spoken, for such fragments were scattered through the old writings, but now he was seeing

them brought together in a marvellous unity. It seemed, even so, that something was missing in his understanding. He had a question to ask so that the matter might be made clear.

‘How, then, can the Most High give us immortality and take us into his eternity, even beyond this time we know?’

The Shemgridion reined his horse to a halt, and Balwone did likewise. Shemmalin turned to face the knight.

‘If the Most High dwell in you, shall you not taste of immortality? If Massia dwell in you and you in him, how can you remain mortal? Mortality speaks of death, of an end which is *the* end. The indwelling of the Most High and Massia speaks of life within you which is not of yourself, but is for you. How can it be otherwise? Sometimes our friends who worship idols call to them to dwell in them. Sire, the indwelling of such gods means that spirits come to delude the worshippers into thinking their god is real and lives in them. Even so, they never find peace and joy in such happenings, but increased bondage of their hearts.’

Balwone looked down at the stallion he so much loved. He even patted the warm flesh of his mount, and, as he did, Ballia gave a sudden high neighing, and it seemed every muscle shook with energy. The knight understood that if the breath of the Most High could make so magnificent a creature as this horse, then what he could do with man must be of a greater nature. He turned to Shemmalin.

‘This makes our venture all the more urgent, as also all the more wonderful.’ He breathed hard. ‘I never saw it on this wise’, he said.

The two men tugged the reins slightly and spurred their horses until they trotted.

Ahead lay night, and the making of a camp, but the two men were not deterred by this thought. Both glowed in the time of the late sun, even more than that blazing in the western sky. Suddenly Kanavah and the forest of Allein became as little in Balwone’s eyes.

The two rode on in what to them was a supernal joy.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Beginning of the Great Journey and the Meeting of Balwone and Gothlic

THE FOREST in which the Shemgridions lived was some miles south west of Endomin, and the main city of Zed was Gothric, an ancient city on any count. It was at the beginning of the third day that they espied it as they were emerging from the forest.

As Balwone stared at it, the memory arose in him of the great tournament he had attended years before, and of the privileged class of courtiers, lords, knights, esquires and royal entourages. Something stirred afresh in his blood as it had with his sight of Endomin in Cathrid, something which had been conditioned in his very blood over many generations. It was not only the nobility of aristocracy, but the very human love of power, of being recognised as the cream of society, of enjoying privileges beyond those of others.

Also there was the attraction of a developed society itself. Even then, as he gazed on the great city, the old temptation to pride in oneself and in human achievements would have stirred him as ever, except that he had spent time with the poor of the world, they who had been brutalised by domination, starvation, and by being considered the offscourings of such cities as Endomin, Cotillon, Magnion and, now, Gothric. He gave a momentary shudder, not missed by Shemmalin who was the Shemgridion at his side on this occasion. Shemmalin sensed the tension in Prince Balwone as that royal one battled with old and new feelings and principles.

‘Are you in doubt, Master’, he said, ‘that King Gothroyd will allow us to pass through Zed?’.

‘I know not’, Balwone confessed. ‘At heart he has ever accepted me, but now, because of the slaying of your brethren, he will be heavy with guilt, though he will call it not that. As you know, men in guilt do strange things.’

‘Aye, and that is the truth’, Shemmalin agreed. ‘But, then, Massia is greater than any or all kings. Let us see what he will do.’

Hearing the words of the wise and simple man beside him, Balwone took fresh courage and assurance. How easily the human mind departed from the deep knowledge it had received through the wisdom parchments, the experience of grace coming to him after his fall at the Holy Mountain, and witness of the Shemgridions to their Lord. It was but a few nights ago that Massia himself had appeared to the knight in a vision. So soon he was forgetting!

At the time of their emerging from the forest, and as all had expected, a posse of the king’s men appeared, clad in armour, bearing the armorial standard of Zed, that of brilliant crimson and fairest white. The leader rode up to Balwone and bowed politely.

‘Prince Balwone’, he said, ‘we had heard that you were entering Zed. This news came to us from King Paelfric of Cathrid, who said he had arranged for passage for you. King Gothroyd is absent from us, but Princess Gothlic graciously agreed that we should give you passage to Miridon’.

Balwone’s heart rose at the mention of Gothlic. He bowed in acceptance of the knight’s message.

The knight continued to speak. ‘Princess Gothlic desires to give her regards to yourself, and has commanded that your party ventures not into Gothric.’

The Prince’s heart sank, but before he could speak the courtier said quietly, ‘I see your men bear no weapons, and you, yourself, no standard, and that you are in the equipment of peace’. In the latter statement he was referring to the garb of Balwone and his friends.

‘That is so’, Balwone said. ‘We come in peace and would depart in peace if it please Her Royal Highness.’

‘It surely pleases her’, said the knight. ‘Prince Balwone, Aethlic is my name, and I was a squire at the time of the great tournament when you defeated the black knight Kanavah. I recall it well; ’twas a royal battle indeed, and I would that one day you might return and show us again the prowess of a Manignian knight.’

Balwone smiled in memory of that famous event. He said gently, ‘I bear different armorial insignia, that of my Lord Massia. His is an escutcheon of a bloody cross, and a golden crown, symbols of suffering and right victory, but you are not here to hear this. I would that you convey our gratitude to His Majesty; his lenience must be strained, for I think he has little love for Balwone of Manignia’.

‘I know not’, said Aethlic, and his eyes took on a darkened look. ‘I was one of those present at the slaying of the Shemgridions. I had not the stomach to destroy such childlike people.’ Having said this he urged his horse towards Balwone and Ballia, and nudged the knight away from his friends, as also from his own posse.

‘I would speak to you privately’, he said, ‘for I have a message from the princess. First, however, I would confess unto thee that my spirit has been deeply troubled since that sad day among the Shemgridions’. His eyes now were troubled, filled with sadness. ‘I cannot forget the love of those simple people even as we slew them.’

He paused again. ‘I never knew what evil can be in a human heart. As I raised my sword a fury of anger and a desire for violence filled me. I was astonished by the evil of my own heart, but at that point nothing could prevent me from slaying those innocent people. It was in that moment that my being was unmasked. I saw the evil of those of us who think of ourselves as courteous and noble.’

His face was now even more dark for the shame he knew.

‘It is a terrible thing to know that we who are trained in chivalry are no different from the meanest of our subjects. They fight and struggle and are violent to remain alive. For us life is luxurious, and yet the same violence lies within our hearts. Prince Balwone, you are a lover of these people, and so am I.

I tell you, I have borne heavy guilt since those days, and know not what to do that I might find peace for my mind.'

Balwone laid a hand on the sorrowful knight. 'Massia will give you peace of heart', he said. 'Pray to him, and this peace will surely come. Those slain are with him now, and know his joy.'

The man's eyes misted and he shook his head. 'This is a mystery I know not of', he said. Aware that he and Balwone had had conversation apart from the others, he spoke quickly. 'As you go you will be met by the royal entourage. Princess Gothlic awaits your coming. I wot that she is ashamed not to be able to welcome you into Gothric and entertain you at the royal seat. Even so, having had converse with her, get you with all speed out of Zed, for there are those who hate you. Many of them bear the same guilt as visits me, and they have cursed you for the day of the slaying.'

Balwone's mind was awhirl with conflicting thoughts. His heart beat hard at the thought of meeting Gothlic, and his mind wondered how he could convey his ten men without despite coming to them from angry courtiers.

'I thank you, sire', he said. 'We will proceed with all haste and with gratitude for this mercy.' His look pierced the eyes of the other. 'May the peace of the Most High and his Massia come upon you', he prayed and he held his right arm upwards, bent at the elbow, as a sign of blessing and as a salute.

The eleven men hastened their speed as they proceeded in the direction of Miridon. Their plan was to enter south of the kingdom and spend the night in the forest. The news of their agreed passage through Zed cheered them. Balwone knew they might well have wished to see the village which had been destroyed by Gothroyd, but, if so, they said nothing to him.

His own heart was a tempest of thoughts. One part of him was warmed by the knowledge that Gothlic was waiting ahead, and the other was in apprehension of what might happen from the angry courtiers.

With Balwone was a Shemgridion by the name of Shemmanal, who had taken Shemmalin's place. He was a quiet man, riding

thoughtfully, but rarely making conversation. Suddenly, to Balwone's surprise, he broke into song. Immediately the other nine joined him. This was not a ballad, but a song which seemed to meander, not having the usual shape of the other lyrics, and the knight suspected it was totally extempore, and this was borne out by the fact that the line or verse would be sung by Shemmanal as a cantor would sing a versicle, and the response of the other nine was a repetition of the versicle. Perhaps they sang to hearten their leader, for Balwone's fears gradually dissolved, and a steady delight came into him. He was in the company of simple men who were nevertheless wise and faithful.

He could not sing the responses, for he was not familiar with their mode of singing, but he leant down to the small sack in which his musical instrument was carried, and, leaving Ballia's reins loose on the saddle, he drew out the stringed instrument, letting his fingers play loosely across the strings. They seemed, so to speak, to catch alight from the fire of the ten men, and in this pleasurable manner he accompanied their sweet song. When, after a time, it ceased, he swung into a song himself, and it was also extempore. The men listened with approval, nodded a time or two, caught the movement of his spirit and then joined him, as they had joined with Shemmanal.

Whilst they rode, all were conscious of the beauty of the day, for although they were out of the forest, they rode along the path that was on its perimeter. Because they were not dedicated patriots of any kingdom other than that of Massia, they could enjoy the delights of all the earth. Away ahead were the first rolling hills of Miridon, faintly blue in a soft haze. The late afternoon sun was westering, the few soft clouds in its path catching a soft pink colouring which would soon turn to brilliant goldens and reds. The birds that gather in flocks before the evening were flying above them, swooping down, changing direction simultaneously on the wing, giving further movement to the heavens.

Balwone and his merry men were still singing when, outlined by the sun at its rear, appeared the royal entourage. There was the brilliant crimson and pure white of the banners and armorial bearing of Zed. The colour of the plumes of the courtiers'

helmets was also a rich scarlet. Altogether the entourage was impressive, but Balwone's eyes were on the royal mare which bore its mistress with dignity.

The men with Balwone bowed to her as she rode up to the prince's mount and looked on him. He also had bowed, and she had acknowledged the salute.

'You have received our royal consent?' she said, and Balwone said they had.

For a moment a look passed between them which sent a flood of warm joy into the knight's heart. Then the intimate look was closed off and she was the diffident princess, being her father's emissary. Even so, Balwone's heart was pounding with a sweetness which was barely tolerable. When Gothlic spoke, the tone of her voice was like that of an angel to the helpless prince.

'Do you purpose to return this way, through Zed, Prince Balwone?'

He shook his head. 'Nay, Your Royal Highness. We purpose to go through Mantria to Frimpone and then to Cautria, after which we shall return at the east extremity of that kingdom, finding our way down into Manignia, and returning to Cathrid for the Festival of the Seasons.'

She was watching him closely without betraying any of her feelings.

'What then, Prince Balwone, is the purpose of your travels, for I have heard you are moving with all speed?'

'It is to visit the kingdoms under Massia's Lordship', he said. 'We would know what obtains in the upper northern kingdoms and bring news of them to King Paelfric.'

'Your purpose, then, is political', she said. 'There will be agreements between Cathrid and these kingdoms.'

'Nought with Paelfric is political', he said. 'He is a man of peace.'

He thought a shadow passed over her face, a darkening of her eyes as though in some sorrow.

'I trust nothing will be of political pacts', she said. Then she added, 'Your Paelfric must have changed over the years. He is now an old man. Are his ideas, then, but an old person's fancies, those of a man tired with the world and its reality?'

He shook his head. 'No fancies at all with Paelfric, Your Highness. He is a man who is still clear in mind and who now longs to ensure his nation will live at peace. I think, too, that years ago our friend Flamgrid had great influence on him.'

She inclined her head slightly. Then she raised her hand in the manner of a command, and from behind the entourage a knight led a horse on which was seated a man in homespun forest green.

Balwone gasped, and hot tears surged into his eyes. 'Flamgrid!' he cried.

Flamgrid was no less moved, but Balwone noted, with a sinking of his heart, that the cobbler sage was aged almost beyond recognition. He seemed to be weak in body. He was aided in dismounting, and Balwone, dismounting also, rushed to embrace him. Their tears mingled, and both men stood back, each to examine the other. Balwone looked up at the princess with gratitude in his gaze. She indicated by the faint nodding of her head that she recognised the bond between the commoner and the prince.

'We would be glad to release our sage into your hands', she said, 'but he is now too weak for travel. King Gothroyd was prepared to let him return to his forest haunt, but feared he might die of infirmity and neglect. He has not been imprisoned, nor has he suffered by reason of want or neglect. Our present desire was that you might see your dear friend, for your paths will not likely meet again'.

The two men held hands for some moments. Then Flamgrid spoke.

'Dear Balwone, beloved student, man of the Most High and prophet of Massia. I have deeply desired this meeting and King Gothroyd himself has allowed it. This is indeed a wonderful day. How then, my friend, does it go with you?' Although the address seemed a trifle stilted to Balwone, his heart was warmed by it. There was deep pity in his heart for the failing old man.

'It goes well, Flamgrid my beloved teacher', said the knight. He motioned a hand towards the ten men on horses. 'They are my brethren and of the tribe from which you were once orphaned. They are my dear friends.'

More than this, he could not say. Flamgrid smiled gently and Balwone saw that his spirit was radiant. There was no sadness in his gaze. Weak though he was, he was a man of serenity. He nodded to the knight who had helped him to dismount and that man went to the saddlebag of the horse and drew out a fat leather wallet. Flamgrid took it, and handed it to his old student.

‘There are the Wisdom writings’, he said, ‘some of which you have never seen and some which, until lately, I had not understood’.

When Balwone made a move to protest, the sage raised a hand to silence him.

‘Little do I need these written revelations, for they are now in my heart. I sometimes think they flow in my veins, but I am near to death and to seeing my Lord Massia. So, in the light of the day and the stillness of the night, I meditate upon these things that are written into heart and mind. They are the given revelations of the Most High.’

He smiled. ‘All revelations from the Most High are mysteries’, he said. ‘That is, they are the secrets he opens to his beloved, to those who listen to him.’

His hand rested on the wallet and the prince’s hand which held it. ‘Read deeply’, he said, ‘and the peace of the Most High be with you’.

Balwone marvelled that the royal entourage had been so patient, but he gathered that they all held the old sage in respect. The two men embraced gently, knowing it would be the last time of meeting.

In all of this, Gothlic had watched with a sense of wonderment. Something of the nature of Balwone came to her, and she needed all her royal training to withhold her feelings. She knew afresh in that moment that she loved this man Balwone, and she had a deep longing to be rid of her royal trappings and to be one with this man in his vocation. She would gladly have abandoned her royalty and way of life to ride with the knight in green garb.

At that moment, Balwone looked up at her, and he read the message of her eyes as she did the answering message of his own.

The two groups of horsed riders prepared to make their departure. The Princess Gothlic bade Flamgrid ride alongside her

mount. Before she turned, she gave Balwone a silent look which told him all he needed to know. He bowed from the waist. The knight in charge raised his hand in a salute to Balwone, and shouted an order to the royal cavalry. With a fluttering of banners, a shaking of scarlet plumes and with the trumpet sound of heraldry, the entourage wheeled in a half circle and headed in the direction of Gothric.

Balwone’s companions remained stock still until the prince had feasted his eyes on the departing friends. When the entourage was out of sight, Balwone lifted a hand in salute and urged Ballia forward, and his companions, too, urged their mounts into activity. The brilliance of the lowering sun faced them as they began their journey. Deeply moved with thoughts rioting within his mind, the prophet of Massia moved in unison with his friends.

Doubtless they understood something of the turmoil of his heart for, as one, they lifted their voices in a favourite ballad. Balwone was grateful for the music, grateful for the words of the lyric and grateful for the glorious singing that ten men of faith could give to him and the world about them.

Their faces turned to the setting sun, they made their way westward in hope of reaching the kingdom of Miridon the next morning.

The men, as usual, made camp with commendable dexterity. In no time they had tethered and unharnessed the mounts, fed and watered them, whilst others were building a fire for the evening meal and as protection for the night from beasts of the forest and marauders of men. As usual, Balwone sought to play his part by working with them, and as usual they declined his offer, desiring to serve him and give him personal time for thought.

As the last rays of the sun had not yet withdrawn, the erstwhile student of Flamgrid opened the wallet of wisdom that had been given to him. Seated on a mossy log in the declining light, he read words and absorbed ideas that stimulated him beyond measure. This helped to cover the storm that was in his heart, a storm which was one of love for Gothlic of Zed, and Massia of the Most High.

Before the meal he invoked the blessing of the Most High upon them as they were about to partake of food and warm fellowship. Grateful, he received from the hands of the men fair food and drink, and when he lay down to sleep, peace was such in his heart that he slept through almost to the new dawn.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

On to Allein: a Meeting with Kanavah the Terrible

THE BAND of intrepid Shemgridions was on its way shortly after dawn. They had risen early, broken their fast, packed and were mounted before sun-up. As they travelled west on the perimeter of the forest, the air was cool and bracing. Balwone sensed that his mount Ballia was, so to speak, coming to life. Not that the white charger had not been vibrant, but on this particular morning it seemed to be filled with zest, so much so that the knight laughed, laid his hands upon the broad shoulders and slapped them affectionately. The thought struck Balwone that the stallion might be remembering his former journey along this road. Then, he, Balwone, had been somewhat in dread anticipation of evil creatures which were said to infest parts of Miridon. Also there had been the thought of Kanavah, the knight who had dressed wholly in black and terrified many of his opponents in tournaments.

Flamgrid had warned him against meeting Kanavah of Miridon, but he had pressed on. Now the thought that he might again meet the dark knight plagued him. 'No pleasant prospect, this', he was thinking. Shemmalin was again his companion, and, since he was a man of deep wisdom, Balwone looked forward to further discussions on the mysteries of the Most High and his servant Massia.

The sun came up suddenly behind them, sending long golden shafts to speed them on their way. The forest on their left became alive. On their right was a great stretching prairie, though without animals to graze it. A faint memory came to Balwone of such a prairie, but for the moment he was watching the swallows and

swifts swooping and sweeping through the azure heavens. Not long afterwards, kestrels and hawks ascended the cloudless arc of the sky, and further west a great eagle circled, its keen eyes searching out its prey, a breakfast for its young ones.

Already the men had begun their musical matins, and Balwone had a wonderful sense of being, of just being alive, alert and aware of all things, as though they were one, a glorious unity. His encounter with Gothic had sent his spirits soaring, and he was, as was Ballia beneath him, filled with the zest of living.

As they had hoped, they crossed into Miridon in the late morning. The knight and Shemmalin had been conversing on the subject of evil powers. Balwone had suggested to the Shemgridion that some of these powers were not material, even though they could be seen. They were somehow composed of elements that resided in human beings and, under some circumstances, became visible as though symbols turned to realities.

Shemmalin agreed. 'Even so, Master', he said, 'whilst they are present to the eye as though real, yet they are present in visionary or symbolic form. There are no such creatures as they present themselves to be, and so their power lies in the illusions they create'.

Shemmalin then hastened to say he believed that there were really creatures—other creatures—which were supernatural, and it was their business to frighten human beings, taking the joy of living from them.

'Man is afraid of death', said Shemmalin, 'and afraid of it beyond any other thing. Yet it is not death in its act he fears so much as where his dying takes him. He dreads the unknown, as much as he treasures the known, no matter how fearful it may sometimes be. Something in him knows that he has gone against the Most High and therefore must suffer the consequences of the stubbornness of his will.'

'His real problem is that he has lived in death rather than in life, and senses that death of his body will reveal that he has always been dead. This he cannot accept since he insists that in this life he is not dead'.

'What is his death in this life?' asked Balwone, and the Shemgridion turned his deep and lustrous eyes on the knight.

'You, Balwone', he said, 'should know that above all men. You have been shown the death that is in you: that which you called life was death'.

Balwone nodded. He was listening closely, whilst not wishing to miss a word because of the singing of the other nine men.

'You mean that within man there is a death which he thinks to be life, and which is of a dreadful nature.'

'It is dreadful when it is dark and ruthlessly evil', said Shemmalin, 'but more evil and more dangerous when it shows itself as the purest form of life'.

'That I know', said the prince. 'Yet there is also in man a strong desire to be holy and pure. The principles of chivalry which we are taught tell us that.'

'It has been told us by some', the elder said, 'that man is half devil and half angel, and whilst this is how he appears to be by the moods we perceive in him, yet he has nothing of angel in him, nor is he wholly evil as are devils: he is no devil. Devils are angels who have denied their true being, and man likewise is a creature who has denied his true being, and such denial is death, living death you might say. For all this he is man, man depraved if you wish, but still, man'.

Balwone reined in his horse, and Shemmalin was also induced to do the same. The prince's eyes gleamed.

'The wisdom of Flamgrid told me that it is loss of communion with the Most High that is death to man. In communion he knows the Eternal One and so knows himself. In departure from the Most High, that life of communion turns to death. So he must make communion with lesser lords, idols and gods. He must, then, have communion with them, for he fears all about him when not living in the Most High, and in some way or another he must have fellowship, even though it may be with demons.'

'How well I, too, remember', said Balwone. 'One becomes heady with one's gods, especially if one considers himself to be as the true God, the Most High.'

The high song of the men seemed suddenly to be infused with a sense of some power come upon them that caused all to be amazed.

‘Massia is near’, said Shemmalin. ‘He is with us as he promised he would be, unseen, yet no less the real for that.’

The prince had come to realise that such singing was perhaps beyond what man knows as human. The song itself was an ascent into the kingdom of love. Within him such a song was welling, but he knew it was not the moment for its birth. Shemmalin was singing with the others, and, as they travelled, Balwone caused his instrument to accompany their heightened worship.

Almost without knowing it, they had reached the border of Miridon. Singing, they crossed it, and saw in the distance what they thought must be a posse of men, all horsed. That was what made them realise they had entered the kingdom.

As the posse advanced, Balwone’s mind was flooded with memories, and one was of his battle with Kanavah, the giant knight who had sought to destroy him, Balwone, who had defeated him previously at Gothric.

As the mounted men drew near, Balwone perceived they were knights and, as with the entourage of Gothlic, they were festooned with banners and royal colours of purple and gold. Balwone could not but admire the noble mounts and men. There were gold and white beagles baying with deep voices, and from out of the group emerged two enormous hounds, somewhat like Balwone’s beloved Morna, but they were different. They were tall, held their heads high, with drooping ears. Their coats were silver, somewhat like ermine. They trotted forwards pacifically enough, but the prince sensed they would tear a man apart if he proved to be an enemy.

He raised an arm in salute. ‘We come in peace, sires’, he said, ‘and have papers of passage from King Paelfric of Cathrid’.

There was silence from the group of mounted knights and esquires. To Balwone’s astonishment a huge knight equipped with armour, wearing the purple and gold, came forward and saluted the Manignian prince. The two tall hounds, their long tails wagging joyfully, joined the man who must have been their master.

‘Welcome to you, Balwone of Manignia. Indeed a warm and hearty welcome.’

Balwone’s astonishment was not at the sight of the knight, but at the realisation that this was Kanavah, a man who always wore mail that was black, and his colour was his own, namely, black alone. The shining of his armour and the cheerful colours of Miridon had changed the appearance of the man.

‘It is Kanavah of Miridon, servant of King Clandius, and doughty fighter of tournaments’, Balwone said with some wonder in his voice.

He was not flattering the man who had had such hatred towards him beyond the venom he had known from any living human. What perplexed him was the genial features of his former enemy.

The knight Kanavah smiled. ‘Doubtless, Balwone of Manignia, my welcome surprised you, but a man’s deeds live after he departs from any place. Such is the case with you. You are the man of the golden sword, and the only knight who has ever penetrated Allein and lived to return, having conquered.’

‘I have conquered nought’, said Balwone. ‘It is true that I overcame foul creatures, but I had not overcome myself until I was overcome at the Holy Mountain.’

‘That is a story I well know’, said Kanavah, ‘but I have good news for thee, Balwone my friend. It is that your defeat of me prepared me for the death of my death’.

Balwone was wholly wondering, and could not make sense of the knight’s narrative.

‘Your death, forsooth’, he said gently. ‘I had not known that you died.’

‘I think you will understand, brother knight’, Kanavah said, and Balwone marvelled at the beauty of his countenance, which once had been so terrible to behold. Now it was kindly and all its cragged features bespoke benevolence.

‘See’, the Miridon knight said without even a look at his compatriots, ‘I was a dark and fearsome man, but beneath my outward actions and powers, I was a fearful person. Though I feared no man, I feared my inner person, so violent was I, and so hating of all human creatures. I had as lief loved my steed than loved a man or a woman, and I gloried in our god of war, Mourn the Terrible. You I hated with hatred

uncontrollable, because you stood for love and for what is right’.

Balwone wanted to cry out, to protest that the man had misunderstood him.

‘Prithee, hear me’, said the giant, holding up a hand to restrain the man who had been victor over him. ‘I know your heart also deceived you, but in your heart of hearts you were Massia’s man, Massia’s knight, Massia’s prince. I had not hated you so much had I not hated Massia more.’

Balwone listened with bated breath. The transformation of his former enemy had gripped his spirit, so much so that he trembled even as he was seated on Ballia.

‘When you entered Allein’, said the knight, ‘I had hoped you would be destroyed, and I delighted in that thought and wish. What you probably did not know was that when you discovered those vanquished by the giants, you also saw my own brother’.

Balwone shook his head in disbelief. He remembered the men of fierce bearded visage and long hair, who seemed like inhuman beasts, but who spoke with gentle voices. They had once been servants of Massia, but great giants had overcome them as they sought to worship at the Holy Mountain of Massia. There were horrific servants of the giants known as Clutterers, who sought to suck the life from pilgrims who had invaded the forest. Only if they stayed within their village and their hovels of huts could they somehow escape these guardian creatures, those who attacked pilgrims when they appeared.

Kanavah could see the effects of a returned memory in the eyes of the knight.

‘You remember’, he said, ‘that you persuaded them to return to their own kingdoms, but only when you had destroyed the Clutterers with a sword that shone golden as it vanquished the cruel creatures. Even then, these poor pilgrims had become so much prisoners in their spirit that they scarcely dared flee, but flee they did, for you had encouraged them to do so’.

The giant of a man urged his huge mount towards Ballia and Balwone, and put out an arm that easily encircled the astonished knight.

Kanavah who was, himself, deeply moved, lapsed into the intimate language of the ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ and ‘thy’.

‘I hated thee and thy sword. Thou madest of me a fool and a weakling, but then I knew not that I fought not thee, but thy Massia and his undefeatable golden sword. When I heard of the saving of my brother, my young brother whom thou sawest as some kind of animal, my heart went out to thee as it went out to thy Master, Massia. I, too, have become a servant of him, and no man in this kingdom of Miridon dare say me, “Nay!” or seek to break my new faith in the Most High and his servant Massia.’

Balwone thought that either his head or his heart would explode, so little had he ever thought a man such as Kanavah would become as a Shemgridion. Now there were hot tears in his eyes.

He continued to stare at his former enemy with such wonder as to make that man bellow with vast laughter. Shemmalin, too, was beside himself with joy, and the rest of the Shemgridions looked as though they might burst out with songs of adulation to Massia.

The other knights remained calm on their mounts, but there was merriment in their eyes, and when they turned their gaze to Balwone it was with undisguised admiration.

‘An old murderer become a child of the Most High’, said Balwone with wonder. ‘A priest of the old gods become the servant of Massia, and now the black knight has laid down his heart at Massia’s feet.’

Kanavah heard this without recoil. He did, however, look at Balwone with curious interest.

‘Who, then, is this priest of the gods of whom you speak?’

‘His name is Aelfric Collenthribben of Cathrid. Once the enemy of the Most High, he is now his enthralled slave.’

Kanavah lifted a meaty hand and smashed it into the palm of the other. ‘By all that is wonderful’, he roared, ‘this is news to make glad the heart’. He kept muttering to himself, ‘Aelfric the sorcerer; Aelfric the servant of Massia. Unspeakable!’. He was obviously delighted.

One of the knights addressed Balwone. ‘We are one with our Lord Kanavah, for such he is, and such is his office as the friend of King Clandius. We all welcome you, Knight of the Golden

Sword. We know Shemgridions when we see them, for such have often visited us in our kingdom, though with little response. Even so, we know and admire them. All the more do we receive and accept you, Balwone of Manignia. We would urge you to receive friendship and hospitality from us. We would ask your presence in our city of Miridon, and the castle of our gracious monarch Clandius.'

'How we would welcome such gracious hospitality', said Balwone, 'but it is incumbent upon us to return to Cathrid by the Festival of the Seasons. King Paelfric has requested this. We must press on as quickly as possible, for we have yet to see Mantria, Frimpone and Cautria. Also we have yet to make our way through the Forest of Allein'.

'Then we will replenish your travelling supplies', said the knight who seemed to be the spokesman for the posse. 'Ere you bed this night we will have such supplies brought to you. Miridon is grateful to you.'

Balwone felt he could hold no more joy than was his, but even this was exceeded when the giant of a knight, Kanavah of Miridon, spoke up.

'I will go with thee, knight of Massia, and, as thy Roget, I will be companion to thee, and servant to boot if that seemeth good to thee.'

'It seemeth good to me', said Balwone, slipping into the old intimate form of speech. 'I would that the trophy of Massia's love accompany me. Great will be our strength of love, such as no giant can destroy.'

Kanavah slapped the back of his new found friend with such force that Balwone almost was unseated. He coughed in order to recover his breath, but his smile was wide, and the love in him was deep.

The leader of the posse who had not even sought to read the letters of passage, held his hand high in salute, pointed it to the north-east, and set his party moving in that direction. The golden beagles started into life, yapping first and then giving vent to their hunting song with deep baying. The wolfhounds had separated themselves from the posse and were standing at the rear of Kanavah's mount.

Kanavah wheeled his horse to fit the party of the men of Cathrid, and they proceeded directly north in their journey to the mysterious forest of Allein. The silver hounds uttered not a note. All travelled until the sun was directly overhead and they stopped for the breaking of the midday fast.

Their meal was oatcakes and dried deerflesh which had been effectively boiled in a pot over the fire they so quickly brought to life and intense heat. Some sprawled on the grass, and others sat on old logs. The sun above them was hot, but not overly much so that they could not enjoy it. The two hounds were thrown pieces of the boiled flesh.

The Shemgridions were fascinated by the size of Kanavah's boots, and they watched with amusement as their supplies of smoke-dried deerflesh disappeared into the stomach of their new friend.

He asked Balwone, 'Should I then shed these accoutrements of war that I wear, and should I take on such garb as you have, Balwone? I would fain be a true servant of Massia as I go on pilgrimage with you. What do you say?'

'It matters not', said the prince. 'You will not frighten our Allein enemies by human weapons, but they testify to the change in your heart. Some in the northern kingdoms may see you as Massia's trophy, but, as I say, it matters not.'

'I have a wish', said the knight, 'and it is to be as you all, clad in simple clothing that speaks peace'.

The Shemgridion men nodded agreement, and their eyes were shining.

'Then I will leave you', said Kanavah, 'and catch you up as you move towards Allein. Mayhap I will come with the retinue of knights and servants who will bring you provender and make up for my raid upon your supplies'. He gave a great laugh at this sally of his humour, and stood to go.

Shemmalin laid a delaying hand upon one arm. 'Stay but a little', he said, 'for we have a song for you which Massia has given us. Prithiee, tarry until we tell it to you'.

He looked around at his fellow Shemgridions. There was a note given by one which all took, and slowly there welled up sweet music without words, for they were partly humming,

partly making a melody in their nostrils. Then the song burst out.

*Massia has loved the great giant of Miridon,
Made him a knight of his grace, and his guerdon
Is a life that is lived in the love that's eternal,
Defeating the foes that are ever infernal.*

*Massia has made him to be ever feeling,
Who once was a warrior fierce in death dealing;
He's made of the lion a gentle meek lamb,
Yet strong as a sire and kind as a dam.*

*Massia, too, is a Lion that is roaring
When evil approaches and demons are soaring
To snatch like a hawk the weak as a prey,
But Massia frightens the snatcher away.*

*So Kanavah loves to be like his Master,
Kind as a shepherd, strong as a pastor,
Hoping to tell of love's transformation,
To win all the kingdoms and save all the nations.*

*Kanavah, Shemgridions, Aelfric and Balwone,
Changed by the love that has brought them all home;
Most High the Father, Massia their brother,
Their Spirit that broods as a sister and mother.*

*Hail then dear Kanavah! Hail man of love!
Companion to Balwone the gentle, strong dove.
Hail knight of Massia, who lives without fear,
Ride with your brethren who hold you so dear.*

The former black knight, now a gentle giant, was deeply moved by their song, for songs bring to the heart the feelings of others as nothing else does.

He stood, swung his right leg over the saddle, lifted himself up, sat, and then raised his great arm in a salute. He was gone before his tears could flow and others see them. The silver hounds loped effortlessly behind him.

In wonder they watched him go, and with his going they made their own—on towards the forest of Allein.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Conquest of Allein, and Balwone Meets a Red Dragon

IT WAS nearing the late evening when a small bunch of horsemen was seen making in their direction. Even at a long distance, it was not difficult to pick out the giant knight. As the men and mounts drew near, they saw Kanavah, now clothed in garments similar to those of Balwone, his two hounds loping behind his steed. He and others carried full saddlebags. They were the supplies sent by King Clandius, and the personal baggage of the gentle giant.

The two groups mingled as supplies of food and drink were given and received. Kanavah kept slapping his chest and thighs.

'Am I a knight dispossessed, or am I another knight of my liege Lord Massia, yet being his vassal?'

Balwone smiled at the simple humour. 'You are a knight not dispossessed, but possessed beyond human possession', he said.

Kanavah's mount was moving forward, its head down by virtue of loosed reins, and its soft nose travelled the green grass. The two hounds were seated, front legs forward, and they were licking the face of the gelding. It was snickering with pleasure, but snorted to show it was not beholden to the silver hounds. Kanavah pulled at the reins.

'What think you, Master Balwone, of my green garb?'

Balwone grinned and said, 'It goes well with the verdant grass. It is at one with the forest. It is lighter than your armour, though I doubt that ever worried you'.

The big man sighed, shook his arms in a spasm of ecstasy, and gazed heavenwards.

‘Better a slave of Massia’, he said, ‘than a free man of the jousting’.

Having received all manner of rations and refreshments, the Shemgridions showed their gratitude to the royal posse. Scarcely had the King’s men departed than Kanavah boomed out, ‘Let us camp here for the evening’. His eyes were on the food.

Balwone grinned with the Shemgridions and nodded his assent. They moved into the forest, finding a convenient glade, and in no time a fire was burning and the aroma of food cooking pervaded the air. Balwone and Kanavah walked to the road, and gazed across the undulating prairie.

‘It was in such a prairie’, said Balwone, ‘that life came back to me after my death at the Holy Mountain’.

‘The food is not yet completed’, the other knight said. ‘Let us sit here and you tell me your story, if it pleases you.’

They reclined on the grass, looking at the sun sinking in the west and feeling the soft zephyrs as they played on their faces. When Balwone had finished his story, Kanavah looked somewhat pensive.

‘To think that I had ever considered you as an enemy’, he said sadly. ‘How I hated your links with Massia and your talking of the Most High.’

Balwone was surprised. ‘So little did I talk in those days. So little did I know of Massia.’

The knight nodded. ‘How little we all knew, else we had not hated him. Friend Balwone, I look forward to our visits to the Upper Kingdoms. There we shall know a good refreshment.’

They heard a call from the bivouac area, drew themselves up, stood, stretched their limbs and returned to the camp.

Balwone knew what would happen after they had fully supped. As he anticipated, Shemmalin called all together for a time of sharing what was uppermost in their minds, and this they did. As, also, he had anticipated, their singing broke out spontaneously, and the harmony of many parts deeply affected the giant knight. As Roget had been moved, so Kanavah was captivated.

He sat, crouched forwards, his eyes and his ears taking in everything.

Balwone was called on, too, to sing his favourite song about Massia, and Kanavah, hearing it, was almost in disbelief. When the knight of Manignia sang it a second time, the other knight plucked up courage and sent a glorious baritone voice ringing through the glade out into the forest and, doubtless, across the prairie itself. The Shemgridions looked at one another in delight.

The travelling team was up well before dawn in order to reach the Forest of Allein before the late afternoon. They now struck out straight on a path that was due north. Going through the prairie was not difficult, but later they came to the wastelands, where little seemed to grow. This gave way to wetlands which were teeming with bird life, including ducks and swans. Water hens darted vigorously at the sound of their coming. Shags sat as though immovable on skeletons of trees.

The region was almost trackless, and it was evident that few ventured into this wide tract of land that led on to Allein. After a brief stop in the wetlands, they pressed on until they had reached the forest of ill fame. They stood for a few moments before they plunged into it, and Shemmalin commended them all to the care of the Most High. Fortified by this blessing, they found a path on which at least two mounts could move abreast, and suddenly they were swallowed up.

On his previous visit, Balwone had found these woods wrapped in sterile silence. There had been no sounds of birds or insects, no rustlings in the thick undergrowth. Even the trees had seemed unmoved, since no breeze visited them. The men looked up to catch glimpses of blue above the tall forest giants. Little sunlight could filter down.

Silence reigned, without doubt, but there were movements which could be heard. A bird moved silently here and there, slipping from branch to branch. Faint rustlings could also be heard in the undergrowth. The large butterflies Balwone had seen on his previous visit flitted silently in the half-shade, half-light of the woods. Large insects noiselessly drew nectar of the prodigal blossoms.

There was little talking, as though the company was seeking to find breath and save it. Balwone looked across at Kanavah, and saw something of apprehension on the man's face. His mount paced warily, lifting its knees high. The silver hounds seemed almost to slide along as though to maintain the silence. All were impressed by the beauty of blooms that stemmed from shrubs and trees and were part of the carpet of grass and flowers. Occasionally there would be the long drawn out whip-call of a bird, after which silence would close in again.

Balwone bent to extract his musical instrument from his right-hand saddlebag, and in order to uncover it he dropped his reins loosely on to Ballia's mane. That animal was, as it were, keeping its own counsel. Balwone had wondered idly what Morna would have done at this part of the travel. Perhaps what the silver hounds of Kanavah might soon be doing. He plucked a few notes from the strings and began his song.

*Intrepid men in Allein's realm
Seek out the time of Massia.
Their Lord Most High is at their side
And shields them in their passage.*

*Through forest dark and forest dim
Where creatures lurk in waiting,
These men of faith have little fear
In Massia contemplating.*

*For he their Lord is in their midst,
His bread of life they savour.
He strengthens them to reach their goal,
The haven of his favour.*

*There they will share the love they know,
The thought of which is moving.
They'll find the company of love,
The Kingdom of his choosing.*

*'Lift high our hearts!' we cry in joy.
'Send now our anthems ringing!
Through wood and dale and every glade
The joyous song we're singing.'*

*Sing high, sing low, sing all about
Massia's way of freedom.
Sing vict'ry over evil's power,
The hour men's spirits need him.*

*Sing praises till our hearts are free,
Massia's worship singing.
Sing captives into liberty
Who hear the songs we're singing.*

*Up, men of faith, ride through the gloom,
Bring light where darkness covers,
Tell men in doom he clears the gloom
By light, who makes us brothers.*

As Balwone sang, it seemed the inertia of the beautiful forest lost its power to keep all things dead and silent. Balwone heard scuttlings and rustlings and rushings and squarkings and flyings and flappings, as though the song had spelt the liberation about which it was singing. For these moments, anyway, the woods had come into their own, becoming by nature what they had been created to be.

The horses, who had been making their way carefully, suddenly lifted their feet as though in pomp and ceremony. Kanavah was making the welkin ring, although it was an inverted bowl over the hitherto languid forest. The two great hounds became canine again, and bounded here and there searching for the animals which rustled, or the birds that fluttered in the undergrowth. The other eleven men had joined with Balwone in his singing, and now they were going through it for the third time, startling carking crows which watched them from the trees, and energising the whip-like calls of one bird and his mate, and the singing of others who had been emancipated from silence.

There was a thought for Balwone to ponder. He knew the lyrics that often came to him, and the music that seemed to gush up with them, might have been of poor quality: he could not properly judge them. What he could say was that the words took on strange and wonderful meanings when they were sung. Then, when taken up by the men of Massia, it was as though the

ordinary details of life suddenly became imbued with wonder of a marvellous kind. He wondered whether pure, heavenly creatures came and aided such worship. He did not know, nor did he wish to know, but he knew that a happening beyond his making came into being when songs welled up within him. Also, the stringed instrument he played became as a thing in itself, producing its own music, transforming the creation that flowed from him without his making.

As they rode and sang, a thought came to trouble him. Was not their singing a bold attempt to overcome the evil powers which dwelt in this place of beauty? Dragons, giants, Clutterers and acolytes of the fierce gods—could they be drowned out, cast down, overcome by singing? Was the singing of this small party an attempt to blare a message and screw up courage and shout down other voices? Possibly, but the power of music must be remarkable if it could silence such opposition. No: the singing was a gift from the Most High, and it brought nothing but joy and release from darkness. It was right and proper. Balwone sang on with a new zest.

It was the time of the evening meal, which was the time of the light fading from above, the time of the foliage taking on shadows and the birds settling into sleep, the glorious flowers being overcome by the darkness, and the spirits of men looking to the social hours when food and drink and converse satisfy the deepest feelings and emotions of the human tribe.

The voices of the men rang out as they searched for firewood, built their large fire, added on the logs and undid saddlebags. They expressed their delight at the Miridon rations of food and drink, and settled against the cold night together on saddle blankets and crude mattresses made by the quick cutting of thin branches and leaves, over which the blankets were thrown.

The smell of food from the pots nestling upon the hot ashes of the fire, and the warmth of cider or some drink made from cereals, made them glow together as they chattered away, made jokes and humorous observations, and teased one another with their idiosyncrasies. It was a night indeed, and finally a night in which their songs sent messages into the dark places of Allein.

After sending songs of worship to the Most High and Massia, and being aware of the Presence of them, they stretched out before the fire. The tethered horses had been fed and watered, and the two hounds had settled for the night on either side of their master, and so, with the exception of the watchmen, all slumbered peacefully, having been wearied to oblivion by the long and eventful day.

Even Balwone slept. Indeed he slept until the hour of weakness which is the time before the dawn when the human spirit seems to have lost its powers and to be subject to the onslaughts of every enemy. At this time the conscience is alert, fending off, as it were, the accusations that come, or turning these shafts upon its host, sending quivering pain to the heart.

Before even he woke, Balwone could smell the sulphurous stench of the great dragon. The hounds whimpered in their sleep, and Ballia moved restlessly amongst his companions, but the prince alone saw the hideous creature. Its eyes were yellow and baleful, its scaly body huge with its paunch hanging forwards. The bloody crimson of its body had an iridescent green that was a sickly hue as though of death, and its weight was upon its mighty haunches, whilst its spiked arms moved up and down incessantly. Into the prince's mind came something he had read in the parchments, 'There is no peace to the wicked!'. This wicked creature was restless, turning and heaving and then snarling and sending forth fumes of heat and bad odour.

Balwone felt no disturbance, no special feeling other than that of disgust.

'Why disturbest thou me?' he asked the huge creature. 'Night is for sleeping for all good creatures.'

'Night is the time for death for foolish invaders of Allein. This is the home of the enemies of the Most High.'

Balwone taunted. 'It is the beautiful forest created not by the prince of darkness but by the God of light. This is the gift of the Most High, but you have polluted it with your presence and your evil deeds.'

The crimson creature glowered even more, but did not seek to answer. Instead it surged with fury and cried, 'It is the place

where death is dealt to the foolish—those who would invade the home of all the gods, and trespass on the domain of the dark prince’.

Balwone did not even feel at his side to see whether the golden sword had scabbarded itself there, or had unsheathed itself for a terrible bout.

‘Quiet, evil creature’, Balwone said. ‘Do not disturb honest men who are the servants of Massia. They are upon a venture which shall set the dark kingdom about its ears and unhand it from its evil.’

‘Wouldst thou speak thus to me who possesses such powers that you could all be cindered in a trice?’ asked the red dragon.

‘You could not do such unless it were given thee’, quoted Balwone from Massia’s words of long ago. ‘Cindered or not, you would not have defeated us.’ He looked at the glowering monster. ‘Thy powers may first make a man as evil as Kanavah, Roget and Aelfric Collenthribben, but it takes a holy Master to turn them into creatures of love.’

‘Pah!’ spat out the dragon hotly. ‘Be done with such puny reasoning. To sword now, if you will, and let us see who is the victor.’

Even then Balwone did not feel for the sword. ‘If I were to slay thee, evil monster, then out of thy hacked pieces would arise many more dragons, none less powerful than thee, and my hacking would but promote your plans.’

The creature was both astonished and delighted. ‘Well now, the fool has learned wisdom. You are right, Balwone of Manignia. We are already many and you would thus make us more. What then will you do to defeat us who are more than you?’

‘More is not more’, said Balwone, ‘and bigger is not greater, and power is not power except it be greater than true power. My answer to you is love. That, thou canst never defeat. Though this body be reduced to cinders, thy action will, by the same token as your destruction, but enlarge the powers and actions of love. When thou didst possess Gothroyd to make him slay the Shemgridions, thou madest a weapon for thine own destruction. We go to release men from your bondage, but your weapons we

will not use to overcome you. I have learned my lesson at the Holy Mountain that true love liberates from the bondage of a fair-looking love that binds even more cruelly than the other sins of man’.

It was as though the foul, towering creature were stoking up its inner fires of rage and wrath, for every word seemed to make fuel for its blazing anger.

‘I could bring you now to red ashes which would blacken in the cold of this night’, said the scarlet beast.

‘Do as you will’, said Balwone, and this time, somehow, the slim golden sword was in his hand.

He lifted his sword. ‘This weapon will slay you every time’, he said, ‘and will not bring forth a brood of like evil creatures. This sword is indeed not my word, but the Word of the Most High’.

The towering beast stamped its clawed feet until, it seemed, its reverberations echoed throughout Allein, but the knight was unmoved and the unarmed soldiers of Massia slumbered on. The two men on watch saw nothing but the darkness of night outside the circle of the camp fire. They heard nothing but the plaintive cries of night creatures. A mount or two snickered in the night, and birds of sweet song called and answered one another. None saw other than a sleeping prince, and none was alarmed.

‘In the end’, said Balwone, ‘your words shall revisit you. No word is without its echo, no accusation without its response, no action without its retribution’.

The dragon stared at him, baffled, deprived of a response. Gradually it faded, eyes staring, body stiff and transfixed as though frozen, and then it was gone from sight and the glen was still and silent at its departing. Deep down in Balwone was a song of delight, and he wished he might sing it, but songs given in the night, he thought, are often for the singer, but not for the singing. He turned over on his leafy couch and let the song run on through his spirit, even whilst he slumbered in peace.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Company Meets Evil and Overcomes It: They Meet Glory and Are Overcome by It

AFTER another early rising, they plunged further into Allein. The oppressive air of the forest had dissolved and, whilst they set out before the sun rose, the dawn came with a flooding of light as the sun broke through in shafts of fine gold, and trees and their foliage were dappled with its penetrating brilliance. The same cloudless blue could be glimpsed above them, from time to time. Songsters were stirring all things to life, and the undergrowth was alive with movements and small creatures.

Shemmalin rode with Balwone. Kanavah had stirred his horse into a canter and then into a gallop, as though the huge man wanted action after restful sleep. The other men, too, were ahead of Balwone and his companion, and, from time to time, snatches of their ballads broke into the morning. Shemmalin and the prince were far enough away to hold a conversation without hindrance.

Shemmalin looked across at Balwone who was riding abreast with him. 'Sire', he said, 'did some dragon or evil creature visit you during the night?'

Balwone nodded. 'It was the great red dragon itself', he said.

'I thought I saw it in my dream', said the elder. 'It was high and towering, crimson and evil. I thought I smelt its breath.'

'That was so', said Balwone. 'He thought to scare us from our journey, and threatened, even, to destroy us.'

'Yes?' said Shemmalin, urging him to speak.

'I told him that he could cinder us, but nothing would deter us. Massia was with us.'

'Then you know the way it is with dragons?' His words were an inquiry.

'I know the way of dragons, giants and evil in their most seductive forms', Balwone said. 'At the end I drew the golden sword, and the thing was rendered dumb. Its power faded and so did it.'

'The golden sword', whispered the elder. 'Tell me about that sword.'

'Oh', said the knight, 'there is little to tell. It is the sword of Massia which comes to me in the presence of evil and danger. It is both the Presence and the Word of Massia. It is also his Action'.

He looked across at the Shemgridion. 'That sword is for all who are his.'

Shemmalin agreed. 'But some are called to be proclaimers, and it is they who become apt in the use of that sword.'

'That I know not', said Balwone, 'but what you say may well be true'. He reined in his horse and looked around him. 'This is the place of the pilgrims', he said. 'I remember it now.'

He stared upwards as though something might descend from the tips of the tall forest trees. He knew Shemmalin wanted him to tell of the pilgrims.

'It is a sad story', the knight of Manignia said. 'Songs came to me in this place, and with them giants of a kind. One, called Sarxia, sought to slay me, but I bested him, and his power was broken. Then came a woman of great beauty, but Ballia loathed her as he had loathed Sarxia, and, behold, it was this giant in the form of great loveliness, enough to stir the coldest of men. When I saw her deceit, I sought to use the sword that came to my hand—the golden sword. In turn another giant attacked me, but in all these events Ballia was my mind and heart. Without horse and sword, I had long ago been destroyed.'

They rode on slowly and marvelled that nothing of this kind was happening to them on this journey.

'What I remember clearly', said Balwone, 'was the tragedy of some pilgrims who were the captives of the giants. These men

had been making their way through to the Holy Mountain, but the giants had drawn blood from them to nourish themselves’.

‘It is ever the way of evil creatures’, Shemmalin said. ‘They cannot exist without the good and without feeding upon the good.’

‘This was a strange case’, the knight said. ‘These pilgrims were smitten with the deceit of self-righteousness and were going to the Holy Mountain, not to receive love, but to observe it. They felt within themselves that they were righteous.’

‘Men not needing grace!’ said the elder, appalled.

‘I told them of grace’, Balwone said. ‘When looking back now I must have told them even beyond what I knew. No matter: many of them discovered the evil of their self-deceiving view, and they rejected it, choosing rather to be sinners and flee to Massia than remain self-righteous and be the playthings of evil giants.’

‘So they escaped from Allein’, said Shemmalin, thoughtfully. He pondered the matter.

Away ahead of them, Kanavah had begun to sing a song dear to him, and the rich baritone voice of the giant knight flowed back to them. As usual, the Shemgridions listened for a verse or two and then joined with the baritone. Balwone smiled at Shemmalin and flicked Ballia who cantered forward and soon they were abreast the huge knight. Balwone joined with him and for an hour they had a pleasant time singing.

It was whilst they were singing that Ballia began to act strangely. Twice he reared up, though without unseating his master. Balwone patted him to encourage quietness, but he felt the trembling of the white stallion.

‘Now, now, Ballia’, he said. ‘What ails thee? Why this unsettled state?’

It was at that moment he felt reverberations around him, and it seemed to him that the whole forest shook. Suddenly, behind the two horses, the two hounds set up a strange wailing. The two men turned to stare at them and saw the hackles of the dogs raised and set stiffly. Back of the dogs were the Shemgridions, Shemmalin now among them, and the whole company reined in.

There, thumping towards them, was a giant who brushed the trees aside as he came, as though they were an unwelcome impediment.

His voice came as the immense roar of a cataract and his cry was, ‘Who trespasseth on this our domain. I smell evil creatures within my forest’.

When he reached the team he stood, stock-still, towering above them as though his head was in the blue welkin. His great hands clenched and unclenched as he bent down to peer at the group of riders.

He raised his arms in anger above his head. ‘This pestilential Balwone of Manignia, is it? Back again to do battle, hey? I had thought your last visit to Allein to the Holy Mountain would have taught you enough.’ His voice rose to a jarring screech. ‘Some mortals never learn. It is fatal to trespass on land that belongs to our prince, and we shall rightfully dispose of you.’

‘Sarxia the evil giant!’ shouted Balwone, thinking the huge creature might not hear him.

‘Sarxia it is’, the giant said, ‘and now I shall rightfully crush you’.

‘Allein is the forest of the Most High’, shouted the prince, ‘and to him alone pertains the disposal of those who are found within his lands’.

‘Allein is ours by conquest, and so is our rightful possession. Thus we shall destroy you and your companions.’ The giant peered again. ‘By the Dark Prince himself, if it is not Shemgridions I see.’ His mighty, meaty fists clashed, and he roared down the aisle of trees he had made, ‘They also shall perish with you’.

‘They who are in fear ever shout with all their might’, said Balwone. ‘Out of our way, Giant, for we are on the business of the Most High and his servant Massia.’

Apart from Balwone none of the company had ever seen a giant, and now they knew deep apprehension in their spirits. Even so, they took courage from the boldness of their leader.

‘Let be! Let be!’ said Balwone, ‘or I will prick thy pride and show thee for what thou art, a vassal of the red dragon and a vain fellow!’.

The huge creature was beside himself with rage, but the company of the faith noted that he did not take a step forward, nor did he physically attack Balwone, who seemed so small and helpless against this bloated strength.

Balwone felt at his side for the golden sword, and it was there, but before he could grasp it, it was gone from him. He saw the sword lift and loft itself towards the giant. What he had not realised, and what the other members of the group had not realised, was that instinctively their hands had gone to their sides. Even the Shemgridions hands went to their sides, although they were not an arms-bearing people. Each felt a sword on his left side, and each was about to grasp the sword he felt there. At the moment of grasping, the swords lifted and lofted themselves towards the giant.

To their amazement, they saw twelve gleaming gold blades rise against the giant, and yet the twelve blended into one, and there, like a gold cross was the sword in midair, hanging pendant-like before the eyes of the giant.

As he stared at it he was terrified. The light and glory of the weapon seemed almost to blind him. He threw up a huge arm to shield himself from the glory and power of that sword. It seemed to emanate its own inner power, and slowly moved towards the frightened monster.

‘Avaunt! Avaunt!’ he cried, his face showing spasms of fear. He was not commanding, but pleading, and his great frame began a trembling and a convulsing which caused the earth to send out waves of tremors. As his arms thrashed, so trees were knocked down and undergrowth trampled with the movements of his booted feet.

He staggered back, and as he did, the sword, still hanging like a pendant, followed him. He could bear it no longer and turned and fled, uttering great cries of fear and dismay.

The twelve men watched with astonishment in their eyes. Ballia reared again, not in terror, but as a salute of triumph to Massia, and the two hounds leapt and barked and bayed, and their sound reverberated through the bush. With it went the neighing of

Ballia, and the other horses, catching the spirit of the thing, neighed also, each stamping a foot, raising a tail high until all tails were plumed banners of victory.

The men were weeping with joy and wonderment. They came together, a band watching the departure of the formerly boasting giant, and filled with praises for Massia. When the noises had subsided, those of the fleeing giant, and the noises of the company and their animals, a vast silence descended over all things. The forest was still, no bird or animal venturing their habitual noises.

The men, too, were silent. As they watched, the trees which had been brought down by the giant, now righted themselves, rearing to their former height. The undergrowth seemed to have sprung back to its former form and being. The men shook their heads for wonder.

Shemmalin was the spokesman for the company. ‘Prince Balwone’, he asked, ‘what is this that has happened? What does it all mean?’

The prince replied. ‘God has made visible what goes on perpetually in many human hearts. He has unleashed the primitive giant which came to us without wisdom, and he has undone him.’

‘Do you mean he was not real—that giant?’ asked Kanavah with a puzzled look. Others nodded as though they were concurring with the question.

‘He was real enough’, said Balwone, ‘but in another sense he is not the giant as you saw him. He resides in every man and woman. He ever remains invisible, but is always acting for his master, the red dragon. He comes from time to time to terrify us. We do not see him, but we feel him. He is the accuser of us all, the tyrant within our consciences, and is as the lion that roars about us to terrify us. The fear of death is his main weapon, and he renders many paralysed with dread for the things he says. Such things lie about God, and boast about the powers of man.

‘Today the Most High has made him visible before our eyes. We can see outside of ourselves that which is within us. Then we see Massia bring terror into the heart of this boasting creature, this braggart. Brag he may about Allein belonging to the red

dragon. All that has been created belongs to the Most High who is true Creator.

‘So, then, you know now that what often attacks the human heart is not of Massia, and when it is portrayed to us in this visible form, then we can lose any fear that we may have had. Moreover, Massia is teaching us not to be in fear of giants, for there be many giants in this world as there be many men and women.’

‘What of the mystery of the sword?’ asked Kanavah.

‘Ah!’ said Balwone, ‘that I can declare to you. The word the Most High utters and the same word which Massia utters are the golden sword’.

‘That we knew’, said Shemmalin, ‘but today there were twelve swords in all’.

Balwone smiled. ‘There is but one sword, Massia’s which is the Word of the Most High, the word that created all that is. That sword not only represents reality to those who live in the false word of evil, but it terrifies them, for they stand as on the edge of a great abyss. They are afraid of falling into it. Also it is the word that strips them naked, so that they have no cover.

‘Now, as for there being twelve swords, there was, forsooth, only one. To each of us was given a part and place in that one sword. All of us were speaking to the giant, even though I alone held converse with him. He was shown that any word of accusation or shame he may have hurled at us would be without power where the sword of Massia, of truth, was present. This whole event was made by Massia so that you might know there are giants, that you might battle them without fear in yourself, and for others.’

‘So’, said Kanavah, ‘we were shown that the battle is not to Balwone alone, and though he might have the golden sword in the hour of need, so, too, may we’.

Balwone agreed with a laugh. ‘Of course! A prophet may have a sword. So may a poor, wise man, and a peasant woman. That sword is for all.’

‘How powerful it was’, said Shemmalin, ‘where it came together before the eyes of the giant’.

‘It was a golden cross’, said Kanavah, ‘and the death to all that is evil’.

Shemmanal, one of Balwone’s boon companions on the ride, held up a hand.

‘Look!’ he said, ‘and listen’.

They looked. They saw the forest perfected. That which Sarxia had trodden down and thrown down in his fury was now fully restored. It was as though nothing had ever come through the forest. All was at peace.

They listened. They heard the trilling, thrilling songs of birds. High up in the tall trees there was a calling, backwards and forwards, to and fro, of many songsters. Skylarks were lifting themselves, and as they spiralled upwards, silver music spilt from them and came spiralling down. Below in the smaller trees and shrubs, and even in the undergrowth, there was a symphony of song and music.

Shemmanal, who had been listening for some time, said, ‘It is a liberation. It is a new forest. Sarxia has been unseated and our friends and companions, the trees, the birds and the animals are all free. They are lifting a continuous chorus of praise to the Most High and his Prince Massia’.

‘Then’, said Balwone, ‘let us also join with the creation’. He bent down, loosened his instrument from the saddlebag, and drew his hand across the strings. There was a thoughtful look in his eyes, and he began to hum a tune. Soon the tune was formed and it was in motion. Then began that strange exercise when men humming move together to be with a song which seems to create itself. The unity brings harmony, and the tune defines as the music grows. Perhaps they had picked up the song the forest was singing. They would never know. All they knew was that it welled from themselves outwards and upwards and flowed into the forest, and beyond that to the sky above the tall giants of trees. They also would never know whether it helped to exorcise that portion of the kingdom of Massia from dragons, giants and perverse spirits, but they thought not much about this, nor cared not, since they had only a heart for the Most High and his Lord Massia. They sang, the horses turned inwards to a circle, the mounts themselves moving not a whit, and the silver coated hounds looking up in adoration at they knew not what, but they, too, being silent. So the company sang.

Evil has gone and good has replaced it.

*Deceit has been met for truth has now faced it.
The sinuous serpent who brought all the error
Has fled from the sword in an orgy of terror.*

*Giants are felled, who fell men and women.
Accused they mankind—both saints and sinners.
Now fallen are they in the dust of their error,
For they flee from the sword in an anguish of terror.*

*The world is created by him the Most High,
But the giants and dragons with Massia now vie
To claim it's their kingdom, their rightful domain,
But they've fled from the sword in deep spasms of pain.*

*The forests and prairies, the pastures and hills,
The brooks that are chuckling, the cascade that spills,
Are all of Massia, no dragon nor snake
Could ever one portion make or remake.*

*And we who are feeble, and simple and weak,
Creation inherit, who Massia seek.
Who seek are the sought ones, beloved of him,
Fed by his love gifts till filled to the brim.*

*Flee dragons and giants, flee demons and all,
For the doom is upon you, and so is your fall.
Creation rejects you who make it a slave,
But Massia frees from Allein's enclave.*

*Haste spirit of Massia, raise your great song,
Worship the Great One who makes you all strong.
Sing as you travel and let every tree
Dance to your music and rhapsody free.*

*Flee giants and dragons and serpents who crawl,
And all forms of evil whose actions appal.
Rise sinners forgiven and let all your lays
Be songs of his mercy and his golden days.*

When they finished, the denizens of the forest took over the singing again. Great Ballia lifted his front legs and reared peacefully, neighing shrilly. The hounds ran around and around, caught the last notes which were those of Kanavah, rich and sustained, and all knew they were in the presence of the Heavenly Beings.

'Look!' said Balwone. 'Look!'

They looked and wondered what it was he saw. He pointed through the trees, and as they gazed they saw a high mountain. Each, including Balwone, wondered why he had not seen it before, but as they gazed, they saw it was a phenomenon of Massia, as operative for good as had been his revelation of the weakness of terrible giants when confronted by the golden sword.

'Look!' breathed Balwone again. Now there was no need to point, for it seemed the great mountain was drawing near to them. The sight of it was as clear as crystal and no less pure than crystal is in itself. Whilst the day had been drawing to its close, they had not yet expected the breaking of colour, the flush of pure roseate hue that flooded first the high massif, the peak, and then flowed down until the exotic greenery of trees, and palms, vines and other creepers were themselves suffused with what seemed to be a holy light, a pulsing glory.

'Oh!' they said in unison. Ballia again reared, until he was almost vertical, but not a sound did he utter. The hounds surprised Kanavah by doing a similar act. The humans wanted to stand high on their saddles, but they did not. Instead they dropped their reins, and stretched arms upwards to the extent that their fingers were high tipped.

'The holy mountain!' breathed Balwone with adoration, though he had no need to define what they saw. It entered into them all, impressing itself, so to speak, for all time and for all eternity.

Balwone's mind ran riot in the memory of the day he had come to it and seen its profusion of fruits and nuts, glorious fluttering and singing creatures, and the brook of pure water which

had given him life and power to ascend to the ridge and beyond the ridge to the peak where a man of quietness sat upon a golden egg.

The prince had thought that a sight of the mountain would unseat him, the memory being so sweet and yet so bitter, so healing yet so wounding, but none of these impressions was now upon him. As with the others, so with him: he saw a thing of beauty as though the mercy of the Most High had vouchsafed this sight to them, whether by reality or by visions they did not know. His eyes feasted afresh on what he saw, and the eyes of the others were filled with wonderment.

Then Ballia, who had been as still as stone, was released from his immobility and stood again upon the earth. Likewise, the hounds dropped upon their paws. As all watched, the soft roseate glory of the mountain faded to a beautiful blue, then that colour gave way to the natural greens of the foliage of trees and vines, the brilliance of flowers and richly coloured fruits. The watchers fed eagerly upon these changes, and then, even as they looked, the mountain seemed to fade, to withdraw from them and their sight, and was no more visible.

‘It is a vision vouchsafed to us’, said Balwone. ‘As the Most High has shown us the fallibility of evil creatures, so he has shown us the eternal nature of his high and holy mountain.’

‘But’, said Shemmalin, who was confused, ‘it has gone!’

‘Yes’, said Balwone, ‘it has gone because Massia would not have us make it our goal, or sanctify it in our minds beyond other mountains; at least not for this time. It was not the mountain we had in mind, but the kingdoms ahead of us—Mantria, Frimpone and Cautria. Doubtless we shall enter into the first of these on the morrow, and doubtless he has given us a gift, a warrant and an understanding which will send us full-handed to kingdoms which already have great supernal riches’.

There was silence when he finished this short speech. After a moment or two, all nodded gently in agreement. Shemmalin, who was a man of wisdom, thought to himself, ‘This man has now been given the true gift of wisdom. He is indeed Balwone the Prophet, even Balwone the Great, for he is small in his own eyes, and hears the voice of the Ones above’.

They stood in silence for some time, and then the deep voice of Kanavah boomed out.

‘Let us to camp whilst daylight is with us. Let us also to food, lots of good Miridon provender, for these sights have given me a wondrous appetite and I shall devour man and beast if we do not hurry to prepare a feast worthy of what we have seen.’

He was as a man with a mountain in his heart, glowing for ever more as the high hill that was roseate in his memory.

Balwone chuckled for the earthiness of the man, and they rode until they found a glen worthy of serving men and horses, and there they camped, lit their fires and partook of their food with great gladness. That night they slept without dreams and apparitions and were being mightily refreshed for the great day of the morrow, the day of entrance into Mantria. That is to say, until near morning, and the unforgettable event of the anger of the old gods.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Company Comes into Conflict with the Dark Powers of Evil and Emerges from Allein in Triumph

ALL NIGHT the silver moon reigned in her quiet dignity. She spattered silver sequins on the oaks and elms, deodars and the rearing firs that stood stately so far below her in Allein. Small animals rooted and snuffled and foraged in the undergrowth whilst owls watched for their emergence into the glens and glades and nooks and crannies of the forest. Other birds hooted and sang and loved and mated, or sought to fill the mouths of hungry fledglings. On the quiet lakes and in the running trout brooks, fish leaped as they do before a storm, both from ancient impulse and for the catching of flies and other insects.

At first, an hour before dawn, the silver light of the moon was abruptly overcome by dark clouds, which made the night to be pitch black. The sky was angry and black, and when relieved by the brilliant lightning, seemed to be a scarred welkin, ripped and torn, and then charged with the anger of thunder.

Before the storm came upon the company of twelve, the horses had been restless. Ballia neighed a warning and turned on his halter as far as its tether would allow. The two hounds came to life with the first crack of lightning and thunder and began a mournful howling. Balwone awoke to the rain that was pouring down with drenching force, stinging as it smote the waking men. The two men on watch had quickly piled timber on to the fire,

and it gave off some kind of light. Some servant spirit among the Shemgridions had pulled out an oiled torch, had lit it at the mound of red ashes and was holding a terracotta bowl over it. Even so, the men could see little but a confusion as they rolled blankets or sheltered under them, each finding his horse, and each soothing it as lightning split the sky, and thunder rolled menacingly.

Ballia was more disturbed than he would have been by a natural phenomenon. He reared and whinnied and neighed shrilly, his front legs and hooves beating upwards as though at an unseen foe. The two hounds moved in that swerving, rounding motion which canines use when they seek to come suddenly upon their prey.

It was at that moment that Balwone sensed it was the anger of the ancient gods. His first thought was that storms were from the hands of the Most High, and though they often brought discomfort, they also brought rain and benefit to forests, wetlands and vast wastelands. But in the near-dawn hour he knew that angry powers of evil and disaster were striking at the feeble band of men, and they without weapons to strike back.

He shouted, 'Hold firm! Hold faith! Hold all!'. His words were almost lost in the neighing of the animals, the howling of the hounds and the strong winds that swayed the trees, tearing at their foliage. Branches, too, were being ripped off and swirled and tossed under the fierce gusting.

Even so, the men heard Balwone, and sought to calm their mounts. Not far from them a tree was struck by lightning. It was a conifer, and flames caught the dry trunk, the oily branches and foliage, and ran hundreds of feet to the top of the tree. As quickly as it flamed, so it was doused by the drenching rain, and the smell of burning came to the men. Then, also, came the smell of brimstone, that acrid sulphurous stench that dries the throat and brings bouts of coughing.

The men stared upwards, wondering what might happen next. Mayhap some of the massive oaks would split and fall upon them, or the mighty elms might shatter and cover them with branches. Lightning might strike a horse and cause a melee in which some could be trampled to death.

At first it was only Balwone who heard the voices. To others the sounds were splinters of the pounding thunders, but to Balwone they were the shoutings of angry lords and ancient deities, the clamour of a raging and virulent protest at the loss of hold and power over human creatures who were their acolytes and devotees. Gods always hunger for worship and adulation, and even for cruel sacrifices that mar and demean the offerers. Such gods demand the submission of the craven slaves of their domains.

'It is the gods, the lords, the giants and the dragons, and it is the demons which would frighten or destroy us', shouted Balwone into the chaos of the storm, as the forces of nature seemed turned against the weak ones in their grip. Balwone was tempted to shout a stern command to the rebellious, vandalising elements, ordering them to cease their savage onslaught, but he desisted because the voices were nearing the group of helpless servants of Massia.

'I am Mournna the Terrible', roared a voice that was stronger than thunder. 'I am the god of the sky, and this is my domain. I am the god of war and decide the destinies of men.'

'I am Fransca, goddess of the hearts of men, and I rule them in their lusts and their desires.'

'I am Spattan who gives life to all things, the forests and the beasts, the fish, the serpents and all humans.'

'I am Terebus who rules the night, and trouble those who seek their destinies apart from the fate I decide for them.'

Some of the voices were feminine, and when Balwone and his company of men heard them—for Kanavah and the Shemgridions were now hearing with Balwone—their soaked scalps prickled with the insidious power of evil femininity. In a moment they could understand the perverted worship of feminine deities, for much was offered in the lust-rousing appeal of these goddesses. The whole of the shoutings and threatenings and screamings were like the offscourings of twisted humanity given deified forms, and coming upon them with stinging vituperations, acidic accusation and the insinuation that brings the gagging of the affected spirits, the rising of the gorge and the binding of the conscience.

The voice of Mournna the Terrible thundered against them again. 'I am Mournna the Terrible and I will not allow my kingdoms to be snatched from me. I am the god of all gods, and all power is vested in me. I will make this Allein a place of ruins rather than let you turn it into your miserable kingdom. I will devastate it and other places rather than let such give your human pride a throne to rule. How dare you set your impotent selves against me and mine?'

As a background to his commanding voice there was a deadly chorus of the other gods, subservient to this Power of powers, yet each seeking his or her domination of the creatures called men and women, the creations of the Most High.

At that moment, it came to Balwone that the path of the good men had been somewhat easy. Blue skies, sunny days, nature harmonic in its songs and its sayings, whilst both sun and moon had favoured the group as though it were sacrosanct. A kind of delight came to him that this disturbance was there to show them that they faced deities which were not inconsiderable in their own domains, not impotent, but deadly and vicious deities who would pervert and distort the beautiful creation of the Most High. In one sense Balwone gloried in the conflict. In another sense he discerned the unrelenting hatred and homicidal wrath of the powers which swirled about him and his men. Strong and threatening as this unnatural storm was with its chaos and turmoil, it was but a foil against which harsh deities were etched, and expressed their murderous opposition and intent.

It was Kanavah, that once dark spirit of a huge and menacing knight, who began the singing. It seemed that this confusion and disorder was an echo of the chaos of spirit which had once been his. He knew this domain and had been an acolyte of the evil forces which now raged and raved.

So he began the singing. Even against the crackings and crashings and thunderings, his rich baritone voice rang out, and the song he sang was his own, for he of all of them had a right to taunt the powers with the reality of his own release from being a dark spirit, and of his own transformation into light, as though he were now light itself.

For a moment the noises of storms and rebel and vagrant gods ceased, and the voice of witness rang out with imperishable sweetness and a clarity of purity. Immediately the chaos resumed and everything that could scream, protest, smother and destroy, let itself loose in a huge cacophony of sound and snarling bestiality.

It was then Balwone heard the song in his own spirit, and the Shemgridions found their preternatural serenity. It was out of such tranquillity that their voices began to smother the shrill screamings and biting vituperations of the insistent voices. Balwone, the Shemgridions and Kanavah sang with a holy authority that, at first, further enraged and then, little by little, suffocated the regime of ancient deities which have held mankind in their lethal spell for so long a time and in so wide a kingdom of death.

The lightning was but a flicker, a glow of heat from a place unknown and distant. The thunder began to die to a whisper, and the louring sky was stripped of its dark clouds and its lashing rain, and the moon shone as it always does before it gives over to the waiting dawn—the divine relay race in concerted action. Even so, long after Balwone and the Shemgridions voices had concluded their psalm, and were stilled to the silence of an exhausted Allein, Kanavah's voice rolled on, the triumph of some newly found power taking him out to the extremities of what is pure humanity, to another and a higher kingdom than all shown that night by angry and bitter deities.

In the end the giant knight let his voice run to its appointed end. There were the twelve of them, soaked to the skin, and now standing immobile, so that horses and men had blended into one silent, but intrepid, company.

After a time Balwone said, 'Thus the evil powers dread us, and thus it shall ever be. Their attack has but awakened us, and we shall cry "Hold!" to all sloth, and "Finish!" to all lust, and "Praise be!" to all that's to come'.

With that the men all cried, 'It is so, and so it will be'. They did not even hear the faint mutters of the defeated deities as they distanced themselves from the little band so impotent, yet so lethal to them—the powers of darkness. Massia was going forth

on his white charger, and in his hand was a slim golden sword and none is proof against that.

The men began to retrieve what had been scattered. Marvellously, there were a few live embers below the blackened and sodden mass of coals.

'There are always dying embers', whispered Shemmalin as though to himself.

'Aye!' they all said, feeding the coals with the dry bark they had found beneath the wet of the trees. Good travellers all and resourceful, they pulled branches that were drying, and soon there was a blazing fire. They dug into saddlebags for Miridon victuals, and some they warmed on the fire, and others they ate as they were.

By the time all had dried out sufficiently, and their stomachs and the stomachs of the horses were satisfied, they were prepared to go into the day and on to the kingdom of Mantria. A little prayer and some concerted singing made them also meet for serenity. As they passed the burned tree, it only served to encourage them in their journey, for it was a memorial to the conflict of the gods which had not proved powerful enough to deter a simple bunch of men and their mounts.

Now it was, 'On to Mantria and the people of the Most High!'.

The sun was still low enough in the sky to break the reign of the dawn, but high enough to give warmth and dryness to the little company. Their horses they had rubbed with rough homespun, and so all were comfortable when the forest of Allein abruptly ended, and they were looking out on the plains and undulating hills of the kingdom called 'Mantria'.

It was a most pleasant sight. A wide river snaked its way through pastures and fields now filled with crops. Variations in green, with honey-coloured cereal crops and the brilliant yellow of flowering rape, made it a sight to behold. They were about to stir their horses into action when they saw, not far from the perimeter of the forest, a strip of country which was fenced with piled up stones over which brambles grew profusely.

They turned aside to examine this curious site and discovered it was a cemetery. They dismounted, tethered their horses and entered, through a lichgate, the holy acre in which there was a bench against one wall: a place evidently for meditation. Most graves had headstones on which were etched either a cross or a fish. Few were without these symbols. Only occasionally was there an inscription and that had been worn away by the weather so that only here and there was a word intelligible. Even so, many inscriptions were written in a language unintelligible to them.

They wandered around the quiet place for some time, and then had decided to mount and be away when an aged man emerged from a grove of trees in the corner of the cemetery farthest from the lichgate. He held up a hand, made the sign of the cross and ambled towards them.

He asked them from whence they had come, and when they told him 'from Cathrid' his white eyebrows rose in astonishment. They had detected he was a man of peace, and had an affable spirit. He seemed startled when they mentioned Cathrid.

'It would be by way of Cautria and Frimpone', he said, and his statement was partly in the way of a question.

When Balwone shook his head and said, 'Nay, but by way of Allein', the man looked at them in astonishment.

'Never', he said. 'It cannot be. Many have attempted it but few, if any, have lived to tell the tale.' His thin, wrinkled right hand and arm swept across the graveyard in an all-embracing gesture. 'These are they who attempted it. These are what we call "the martyrs of Allein". They perished in their venture.'

He pointed towards the woods. 'We found these bodies or bones on the edge of the forest. Oft times we search the edges of the Allein, but do not venture in. That great forest must have many bones hidden and rotting away. The gods and lords and other creatures have long made their home there, and take it badly should any trespass therein.'

He stared at them, his aged face wrinkled, but his blue eyes, as though young, were piercing in their gaze.

'Tell me, good sirs', he begged, 'if it be true that you have come through Allein'.

'It is true', they said. 'The going was hard, but by the power of the Most High and his servant Massia, we made it to this place.'

The old man threw up his arms in delight. 'You be the first I have ever met. Praise be to the Most High.'

He moved nearer and peered at Balwone. 'I perceive, Master, that you be a prophet.' He nodded his head, and went on, as though in soliloquy. 'None but a prophet can make it through Allein. To defeat the dark powers of that realm is beyond human strength.' He looked at Balwone, 'Doubtless you are a prophet'.

He then regarded all the company, but his eyes returned to the knight of Manignia.

'Whence come you, Master?' he asked.

'My land is Manignia, but we have travelled from Cathrid at King Paelfric's request.'

'Then you must be Balwone the Great!' the old man said with a voice filled with excitement. 'Rumour has had it that you would come to our land.'

With that, he clapped his hands and went forward, offering those hands to the prince who took them as though to warm and strengthen them. The remainder of the company looked on with interest.

'Tell me, Master', he said, 'what adventures had you in the dark forest? Did you, perchance, meet the great red dragon or his helpmeet Sarxia the giant, and others of this ilk?'

'We did indeed', Balwone said. 'We were dependent upon Massia, and were helpless apart from him.'

'Yes. Yes', the keeper of the graveyard said. 'All are dependent upon him, but what of the creatures of the land, trapped in the darkness of these evil ones?'

'We believe', said Balwone, 'that the Most High reclaimed his created territory, and broke the power of its evil rulers'.

'Praise be! Praise be!' the old man said with glee. 'Oh praise be, indeed.'

Balwone looked at the sun which was rising high. 'Old friend', he said, 'it is meet that we now ride on'.

'Of course. Of course', the old man said. 'But first pray for the memory of these pilgrims who have given their lives to reach us. Pray for me too, and then let yourselves be gone.'

Balwone signalled to Shemmalin who, in turn, motioned for bowed heads, and he prayed to the Most High for the old man, and gave thanks for the Allein martyrs and he asked that the day might be pleasing to Massia and the Most High.

The keeper of the graveyard watched them as they wheeled horses and made towards the farms and houses, and what seemed even now to them to be a city on the distant undulating land. There was excitement riding high in the hearts of them all. That Balwone's coming had been anticipated encouraged them, and it was inevitable that they would burst into singing, ballads and all.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On to the City of Bekrift and King Clopelt

THEY arrived at a farmhouse about midmorning. There were men piling up hay on a stack, and women grinding some of the winnowed wheat. All stopped as the twelve men rode in. A man who seemed to be the yeoman of the land came out from the house, wiping a hand on his apron.

When he spoke it was in a language strange to the men from the east.

Perceiving they were puzzled at his speech, he spoke in the lingua franca of the northern and upper northern kingdoms.

'From whence, strangers, do you come?'

Balwone said, 'We come from the east via Allein'.

The same astonishment showed on the farmer's face as had been on the face of the keeper of the graveyard.

'This thing we have not heard before now', the yeoman said. 'To dare dragons and giants and demons in their den and then escape is a new thing.'

Balwone acknowledged the words of the man, but said, 'We did not escape. Massia proclaimed his victory over these perverse creatures, and he reigns in the forest, having reclaimed it for himself'.

The farmer shook his head in part unbelief. 'That you are here is evidence of some breaking of the dark powers', he said, 'but belief regarding your coming through the forest is not so simple'.

For a moment he stood surveying the party, and gradually understanding showed in his eyes.

‘You there’, he said, pointing to the ten men, ‘you are, of a truth, Shemgridions, but what is this garb you favour and why do you wear it?’

They told him the story of the massacre of Zed, of the conversion of Paelfric to the faith, and the change in Aelfric Collentribben the high priest of the pagan gods. They went on to speak of the plan of King Paelfric, and his advice that they exchange their special garments for those of ordinary men if they would spread the faith of Massia throughout the earth.

The farmer was visibly astonished, but he nodded his agreement and now, as his wife joined him, he stood legs somewhat athwart, sleeves rolled up and his whole person attentive.

‘Thanks be to the Most High!’ he said, and Balwone perceived some astonishment in the eyes of the farmer’s wife at her husband’s utterance. It seemed she had not heard him speak much of the Most High for some time. The farmer glanced at her and appeared to be somewhat abashed.

‘Here in Mantria land’, said the farmer, ‘we have long been followers of the Most High, but not all of us live in faith. I, myself, am but a follower from a distance, whereas this my wife Haleen is a devout person and obeys Massia and his servants’.

Balwone was puzzled. ‘We had heard that the old gods had been displaced by Massia in Mantria. Why then should you follow afar off?’

The farmer still showed signs of embarrassment and his speech was uneasy. ‘Whilst Allein remains in the hands of the dispossessed gods, we are not always sure the Most High is as his name claims him to be. We men of the land have no memory of the blessings and the cursings of the gods, but legends have come to us of wonderful days when the gods reigned. They were days of high festivities, of harvests and joyful coming together. The feasts of the Most High are less colourful, and sometimes we yearn for the old days as recounted to us by our forefathers. We think, too, “Why cannot the old gods come and repossess the land?”. Then there would be great joy.’

‘Hush!’ said his wife. ‘You speak foolish words my husband. The Most High has given this land much prosperity, and fewer there are who are slaves to their lusts and passions.’

The husband nodded, somewhat dutifully, but the prince read his eyes.

The farmer sought to clear himself. ‘All will be different’, he said, ‘when Balwone the Great visits us. Then the old fervour will return’.

‘Hush!’ his wife said again. ‘Use not such words, Frillain my husband!’

There was a silence in the company of horsemen. This was the second time of mentioning Balwone the Great, and the knight’s friends were moved by the word which had been in Mantria prior to his coming.

Then the knight of Manignia said, ‘I am Balwone whom you call “Great” but whom I call “the simple servant of the Lord”’.

By this time all the men and women of the farmyard had gathered and were listening. When Balwone declared himself there was a sigh, followed by the hush the Shemgridions and Kanavah had already known as the farmer took Balwone’s name into the conversation.

The sturdy yeoman seemed almost to crumple. He went to bow his head over Balwone’s hands, but the knight gestured him away. ‘Whatever your legend may be’, he said, ‘I am but a man as are you all, and I have sinned greatly against Massia and the Most High. Only his mercy has given me this office in which I am before you. I am greatly amazed that in Mantria there are those who do not strongly believe in Massia and follow his ways. We had heard this kingdom is fully under Prince Massia’.

‘There are many’, said the woman Haleen, ‘who follow him and do so closely, but there are others whose faith has waned. That is why, Balwone, the Lord Massia has brought you, and brought you through the domain of all evil, that forest of Allein. I mind that our good monarch and his queen are waiting upon your coming’.

Balwone’s mind was thinking rapidly, but even as he pondered the events of meeting Frillain the yeoman, that man’s wife was saying, ‘Good sirs, dismount and favour us with a brief stay’.

She indicated the farmhouse, and at Balwone’s nod all dismounted, their horses being taken by the servants. They followed

Frillain into the long, low-ceilinged living room, seating themselves on benches close to a long table. The farmer's daughters were three buxom country maidens with rosy cheeks and good features. They set large beakers of milk and platters of oaten cakes before the men. Although the men had broken fast in a plentiful way, they nevertheless received the luxuries with pleasure.

Haleen was talking delightedly with the prince. Kanavah was making great inroads into the delicious food and drink, and the farmer was staring, hands on hips, at his visitor, the Great Balwone. That man, for his part, was pondering a work of some magnitude which lay before him. He was realising that simple talking was not the whole of his task. He called Shemmalin over and murmured something. Shemmalin turned about and uttered a few Shemgridion words. At this signal, the men began a Shemgridion ballad in the language all present understood.

At the sound of the words and the voices expressing their faith in wonderful harmony, the working folk from the yards came crowding in, listening intently. As they looked at the party eagerly, comprehension was coming to Balwone. This was to be his mode of speaking to people in a prophetic way, calling them back to their old faith, and forward to new exploits under Prince Massia.

The ballad was followed by one of Balwone's songs, and because Kanavah was familiar with it, his strong voice throbbed out, affecting the listeners no little. Haleen had turned to the singers and was hearing them with rapture, her face shining. Her daughters had much the same look on their faces, and the servants were frankly admiring. Balwone could see that Frillain, too, was deeply moved, and he was gratified.

On the third song some of the assembled group joined in. Then all were singing in a mood that was rhapsodic. No sooner had the company stopped than the farm folk began a song of their own. It was not in the same language, but no one could mistake the humility, the adoration and the worship. After letting them sing awhile, the Shemgridions joined in, for they knew the language.

Finally Balwone held up a hand. 'We must press on', he said, 'for we have little time to be in Mantria, Frimpone and Cautria. We have to be back in Cathrid for the Festival of the Seasons'.

He saw the shocked looks on some faces, and shook his head. 'We will not be participating in the Festival', he said, 'but we will be using the time to be telling the message of the Most High and of Massia his servant. We seek to bring the northern kingdoms to Massia, as these upper northern kingdoms have already come to him'.

There was a chatter and a hubbub, but Balwone stood by his decision. He saw no need to teach any of the wisdom he had gathered. The witness of their having come through Allein and having vanquished their enemies was sufficient for the farm folk. Balwone the Great had arrived. The prophet was in their midst. Faith was revived, and Balwone had a notion that Frillain would be more about Massia's business henceforth than about his own.

They were warmly farewelled at the farm gate. Kanavah came up to ride abreast with the prince.

'Friend Balwone', he said, 'Massia has sent his servants before you to tell of you. How foolish I was in my envy and hatred of you. Now I am your servant with all my heart, but what then can I do more than I am doing? I feel helpless. Once I could command men and they would obey me. Now I am as one without strength'.

Balwone shot a warm look at his new friend. 'Stay that way, dear Kanavah', he said. 'We are all weak, else how could we have come through Allein? I value your friendship and your presence. You are the only other who has lived in the company of knights and it is good to hearken back to old days, together.'

Kanavah gave a gloomy nod. Then he brightened. 'This is a new world for me, this singing. Yon Shemgridions are all masters of that art.'

'None less yourself', said the prince. 'Your voice will stir many.'

They were passing one after another of the farm houses.

'Soon we will see Bekrift, the pride of Mantria', said Balwone. 'We have letters to King Clopelt and doubtless he will

aid us regarding what we should do in Mantria. It was good to be told today that King Clopelt and his wife Mercia have remained firm in their loyalty to the Most High.'

Over the next rise they looked down and saw the city nestling in a wide valley. A river ran by the town which seemed densely populated. As they drew near they were intrigued by the architecture of the buildings. There was, of course, the great royal castle of Bekrift, the city bailey, the moat and the palace bailey, but many of the buildings in the town were of stone and not of timber. The city showed signs of prosperity, and there seemed to be no slum area such as is common to all great cities.

The Shemgridions were welcomed by innumerable people, some shouting up salutations to them, others running to the horses to give and receive personal, intimate greetings. Without doubt, the men from Cathrid were overjoyed to be amongst their own who, here, were present in large numbers. Balwone noted that the friends of his companions all wore traditional Shemgridion clothes, but perhaps that fact was not even noticed in a kingdom which was under the name of Massia.

They came to the first portcullis which had been drawn up to allow visitors, as well as citizens of Mantria, to have entrance. At a certain point their papers were scanned and they were motioned forward with smiles. The first breeze of hospitality was flowing, and there seemed to be no suspicion regarding the Cathrid party.

The castle drawbridge was also down, people passing backwards and forwards through the second opened portcullis without being checked. Just as Balwone and his group were about to set foot on the palace drawbridge, a platoon of the palace guard rode across the bridge, split in the centre and rode on both sides of the Cathrid company. They held high banners and wore armour with helmets plumed with blue and gold colours. Once they had enclosed the visitors, the captain of the guard rode up to Balwone and saluted him. As he raised a hand to do this, so did all members of the guard.

It was a beautifully executed ritual, and again Balwone felt pleasure flood through his body. Something about him admired the age-long ceremonials, and he saluted back, and with him all of the party saluted.

The captain of the guards did not give his name, but he spoke of a warm welcome from King Clopelt. At this very moment they were waiting to receive Prince Balwone, Knight Kanavah and the remainder of the company of Cathrid. Ostlers relieved them of their mounts, leading them away. The only thing taken from their luggage was the musical instrument, an elaina, which Balwone handed to Shemmalin for safe keeping.

In the great hall they were warmly welcomed by King Clopelt and Queen Mercia. The royal couple were advanced in years, but both had calm countenances and they welcomed their guests most courteously. Carved and upholstered sturdy chairs were brought for both knights. Refreshments were served to all. The guard platoon withdrew in regimental fashion, and those only were left who were the servants, the royal couple and the party from Cathrid.

Whilst the refreshments were being taken, Balwone surveyed the great hall, observing its grandeur, its rich furnishings, its almost overwhelming luxury. Not in any of the lower northern kingdoms had he observed so palatial a royal great hall. His mind went back to Flamgrid and his simple forest hut, and as he thought of his cobbler mentor, the true sage of Zed and the other kingdoms, tears came to his eyes. King Clopelt was occupied in conversation with Kanavah, and Queen Mercia leant towards him.

'Prince Balwone, we have long awaited your coming. Prophecy has it that you would bring great blessing to us. I perceive that something troubles you even at this moment.'

Balwone said, with some grief in his heart, 'I was recalling my mentor, Flamgrid the sage, whose life was spent in simplicity in a rude hut in the forest of Zed. Unbeknown to him, he was of the tribe of Shemgridions, but from birth he sought the wisdom of the one God, whom in truth he did not wholly know. He sought him in his devotions, his simple way of living, through his trade of cobbling and then, when he was proficient enough, through the reading of the ancient wisdom in scrolls and books and rare manuscripts. This man had so little, and Zed had but the religion and rituals of the ancient gods, yet he kept himself pure

from such worship and ceremonials. He was a great man of God’.

‘You speak of him as dead’, said Mercia, looking into his eyes and seeming herself to be troubled.

‘He is now old and frail’, the prince said, ‘and would wish himself back in the forest to die in his beloved hut. As it is he is but a prisoner of Gothroyd, though free enough to move around in Gothric’.

Balwone shifted in his chair, knowing a slight unease in his spirit. His gaze still held the eyes of the queen.

‘Your Royal Highness, I feel myself to be as a peasant when I behold the vast wealth and opulence of your city and your palace. I hold no envy, but my spirit longs to see wonderful evidences of the Presence of the Most High. I doubt not he is here, but the signs of material success which I see contrast strongly with the simplicity I have known, even amongst those who as yet do not know Massia.’

‘You are a prophet’, she said, ‘and you see and sense such things. However, Prince Balwone, be comforted. The prosperity of our people is not a thing of shame. We do not have a worship of these things, but treat them as gifts from the Most High. Great cities are often places of shame because of the differences of rich and poor, and because of dens of evil which grow up around the evil and lusts of impoverished men and women. If we maintain this splendour of the royal castle, it is but to receive traffic from other kingdoms whom we seek to show the grace and mercy of the Most High’.

The shadow cleared from Balwone’s eyes. In a small burst of joy he smiled at her, the tear or two he had had for Flamgrid drying. ‘I had set such store by coming to a land which was under the rule of Massia’, he said. ‘There is a tyranny of the old gods in our kingdoms, and warring is prevalent, and poverty is to be found in our cities. The joy of Massia such as the Shemgridions have always known is absent from our great halls, and our courtiers. Yeoman and peasants, all alike, do not know the joy of the Most High, and they persecute those who do.’

It was the queen’s turn to look troubled. ‘We have a surfeit of good things, and as you will see we gladly worship the Most High,

and seek to follow his servant Lord Massia. Even so, much blessing can be taken for granted. The security of the Most High can be taken for approval of all that we do. I grant you that even at this time the fire of Massia burns low. For times of renewal and causing that fire to burn strongly, the Lord Massia sends us prophets and proclaimers who chastise us with words, and lead us afresh into that communion which is the sweetest and richest of all the gifts of the Most High.’

On hearing these words the prince was greatly heartened. He thanked the queen amidst the tears which had returned to his eyes. He was also moved by the booming voice of Kanavah as he was speaking to King Clopelt. Few in the hall could have missed the thrust of his speaking. He was talking of a knight whose heart had been dark, who hated talk of Massia, and who sought, time and again, to destroy those who were followers of the Most High.

Balwone listened with delight as the huge fellow berated himself before the king, telling what he had been, and what he now desired to do in the service of Massia. The prince could see the affects of his words on the king, and his heart was warmed.

As yet, Balwone had had few words with the king, and he saw it was time for preparation for the evening. Queen Mercia had spoken of meeting again in the evening at supper to which the company of Cathrid was invited.

As the king and queen rose, the guests also rose, and followed the royal couple to the heavily timbered high doors. There they were met by servants who led them away to their quarters, the Shemgridions in one direction and the knights in another.

The apartments of the two knights adjoined one another, and before preparing for the evening meal, the two men sat together, looking across the castle bailey out to the fair domain of Mantria, their hearts too full to express all that they thought, but they shared something of their delight in being in a realm so free of court intrigue, and shared also some of their unease at the opulence they had seen in the realm of Massia.

Kanavah spoke of the king’s warm response to his story of the change of his life from being that of surly pagan to being a willing subject of Massia.

‘Balwone’, he said earnestly, ‘what worries me is that all these years they have not sought to liberate Allein from the red dragon and his wretched allies. How could this be?’

‘Perhaps’, said Balwone, ‘Massia kept that conquest for such a time as this. Perhaps his design was for us to bring a new fire to this kingdom which has long been his. Who knows? We do not rightly know. All the ways of the Most High are past our finding out unless he tells us.

‘Come, great friend, let us prepare for this evening and ask that such a fire may be lit that nothing will vanquish it, and that the red dragon may be greatly put to shame’.

With those words in their ears, as though they had come from Massia himself, the two men made ready for the feast of the evening.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Balwone and Kanavah Meet Both Love and Hatred in Bekrift, the Royal City of Mantria

THE EVENING meal, though formal, was in fact an occasion when King Clopelt got down to action. Queen Mercia sat on his right and on her right was Kanavah. Balwone was on the left of the king, and they had no sooner asked the blessing of the Most High on their meal, than the king began his conversation with Balwone.

‘You are here as Balwone the prophet’, he said, ‘and not just as a royal guest. Within a very short time, and without much examination of our people, you have come to the quick conclusion that we are not a people burning for our God Most High and our Saviour Lord’.

When Balwone put out a hand in part protest, the king motioned him to rest his hand. ‘I know you may qualify what you have said and I agree you have seen little, but I believe your discernment to be right. I can recognise a prophet when I see one, though such we have not seen in many years. I therefore counsel you to accept your own discernment as prophetic, and not moderate what you say. What I now request of you is your sense of what must be done.’

When the prince began to interrupt, the king shook his head. ‘No, Balwone, you are a man on a mission, and you seek to cover our three upper northern kingdoms as quickly as possible. This, too, you must do, but you must not simply pass

through. Whilst a prophet is enjoined not to stay long in any place lest he begin to corrupt his own word with compromise or qualify his strong message, so also he must stay long enough.

‘My advice to you is that you be sure that what Paelfric has asked of you is right and proper; that is, whether you should hasten back in time for the Festival of Seasons, or stay in each kingdom until the faith of Massia’s people is enlivened and the kingdoms transformed.’

‘I am sure, quite sure’, said Balwone, ‘that I must be in Cathrid for the time of the Festival’.

‘Very good, then’, said the king. ‘Now this is what I believe should be done in Mantria. The day following the morrow is market day. On market day many country people flock in for a great day of bartering which happens but twelve times in the year. There are folk in the outreaches of our kingdom who still hold, in their hearts, the old pagan religion. They are hostile to the changes that took place some hundreds of years ago. They go to Allein to practice their rites and to retain the favour of the old gods. Mayhap already they have heard of you, and either hate you or regard you with respect.’

‘You will appeal to them more than our traditional preachers and teachers, for you will come in the spirit of the Most High and Lord Massia. It is not that these men are not true servants of Massia, but they lack the fire I perceive to be burning in your bones. I would, therefore, that you prepare your Shemgridions for such a time as our bartering day, and that you allow Knight Kanavah to testify to the change in his life. You must also speak of the conversion of Aelfric Collenthribben, for he is known even here as a great power of the old gods.’

‘I have preached little’, said Balwone, ‘for I do not have a good flow of language and ideas’.

The king nodded, almost impatiently. ‘Your power’, he said, ‘lies, as it always has with the prophets, in the poetic word, and poetry sung in the freedom of your inner spirit’.

The prince of Manignia marvelled at the clear thought of the king. He was somewhat ashamed of his criticism of the luxury of the royal palace and the prosperity of the people. Had he

wanted them to be poor and without wealth? He silently rebuked himself.

‘Your Majesty’, he said. ‘I concur with all you have said. I know that living truth can become but a form of words and ritual, and powerful epochs must needs come and go in the history of the people of Massia. That I know from history. I also know that a golden sword has been given to prophets and proclaimers so that they can break through the deadness of conformity and those traditional rituals. Of myself I am helpless, but in regard to vocation I can never escape what I must do and be. That my beloved father and mother—Facijs and Merphein—taught me.’

Clopelt heard the man and admired him for his answering sincerity and acceptance of the Mantrian situation. ‘Then it must be so, Prince’, he said. ‘On the morrow take your fill of the people. Move amongst them, talk and eat and drink with them. This will fortify you and your company. The freedom of my kingdom is yours, to do what you will.’

‘Now, as we finish this meal, it is the hour of your prophetic ministry to us and our household. All servants will be called. Indeed, they are awaiting this signal. Then you shall say what you will, and you will sing what you will, and you will lead us in worship as it seems fit to you. Meanwhile eat and strengthen the inner man, for the outer man must do strong work this evening.’

Balwone sat for some moments, barely eating. It was as though this royal man Clopelt had stirred the fire within him, and the flame was urging him to action. Unconsciously he began to eat the good food set before him and to drink of the royal flagon, but his eyes were on Kanavah, increasingly animated as he conversed with the queen. The men in green garb were not less lively in their conversation one with another.

As the meal drew to a close, the members of the royal family, the servants, and old friends who lived at the court of King Clopelt began to fill the great hall. The weakest—the aged and the frail—went by the wall, against which they could lean were the meeting to prove too long. There was a certain element of protocol, so that the nobles stood at the front, and the servants ranged at the rear. The meal being finished, but the dishes and goblets still being left on the long table, the king rose to speak.

‘By now you will all know that Prince Balwone of Manignia, Knight Kanavah of Miridon and some of the Shemgridion family of Cathrid are present with us.

‘Because all are of Lord Massia, we are glad they are here. Prince Balwone is, as some of you will know, a prophet of the Most High, commissioned to be so by Lord Massia.

‘For some time we have been advised that a servant of Massia, named “Balwone the Great” or “Balwone the Prophet”, was to come among us in these upper places of the northern kingdoms.

‘This man standing beside me is, we believe, Balwone the Great, and we have welcomed him into our midst. He does not count greatness in terms of wealth, status or possessions. He himself has inherited a great castle known as *Zagonholme* in Manignia, and he has refused to use it or to take the opportunity to be king in his land.

‘Therefore we must listen the more earnestly to what he has to say to us, for it is a thing of shame, and a thing most dangerous, to hear the voice of Massia speaking through his servant and not receive what he has to say.

‘This Balwone has helped to bring to the faith of Massia an old sorcerer whose name you will well know: Aelfric Collentribben, priest of the ancient gods.’

As the king paused a great sigh went up from the audience. Some gaped with mouths wide open, and a few became vocal, doubting that this could be so. Balwone sensed they were not all of Massia, and perhaps were even enemies of the Most High. Even so, a tremor of excitement went through the people.

The king went on, motioning Kanavah to his side. Kanavah was so tall and broad that many gasped as he rose from his chair and went to the right side of the king.

‘This man’, said Clopelt, ‘will now recount to you something of the man he was, and of the change which has come to him by the mercy of Massia’.

The knight of massive proportions was heard in utter silence. The hearers could not credit the successes the man had had in tournaments, the many royal courts at which he had been presented, and then his encounter with Balwone, especially as he had been spared by that prince. He told of his inner anger, his

great despair, his bouts of rage which would come when he heard the name of Massia and met his servants.

Last of all he spoke of astonishment at hearing of the fall of Aelfric, and his conversion to Massia. Already seeking a change in life, he told how it was that Massia had come to him and forgiven him his sins and his evil-doing and had also given him a purified conscience that no longer accused him but served him in marvellous manner. So moved was Kanavah that the tears flowed from his eyes, and many, in sympathy, also wept.

The king remained silent, not even looking at Balwone, but that person rose, and began to speak. He, too, told of his early beginnings, of his being the student of Flamgrid the sage and cobbler. He spoke of the ancient wisdom, some of it coming from the priests and acolytes of the old gods, and some of it from the ancient people of the Most High to whom Massia was one day to come.

He did not enlarge the details of his life, passing over them summarily, and he came to his venture when first he was called ‘Balwone the Great’. He told of his pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain, of his dreadful failure, and of his dying to the haughty young man who had presumed upon the mercy of the Most High.

Again, the prince did not enlarge on those days, but when it came to what he called ‘my resurrection’, he wept, and the people wept also. He magnified the grace of the Most High and the love of Massia, and concluded with the vision of Massia in which he had been commissioned to be a prophet to the nations.

At this point, the people broke into applause, and the prophet was moved to take up the ancient instrument of Nappali. The Shemgridions of the party, seeing him do this, waited for his old song, and sure it came with all the passion of one in love with his Lord. The men in green allowed him but a verse, and then they took part with him.

The astonished audience saw and heard the Cathridions as one voice, singing the history of the people of the Most High, the coming among them of God as a man like themselves, and then of his death manipulated by ignorant and wicked men and women.

In the audience were some Shemgridions, and they could not forbear, and very soon they had joined as though having learned

the song many decades before, as though having sung it lifelong. This impressed the whole audience and some kind of a movement began in their own spirits. Soon all were singing except, perhaps, one or two who were secret worshippers of the old gods, and possibly even some of them were swept into the beautiful symphony of sound, of blended voices and spirits, so that all seemed to become of one heart and one mind.

Balwone's song led on to others, some of which were favourites with the citizens of Mantria, and they sang them out of love and worship, and it seemed to them that these songs had come to life and were great vehicles for the expression of undying love. The evening became a mighty lovefest and none wanted it to cease, and none desired to leave.

It was the king who brought the evening to a close. 'Of a truth', he said, 'it is plain that there is a prophet amongst us, and these of his company are sons also of the prophets and of the Kingdom of Massia. We receive them, then, with great joy. We bid them the freedom of Mantria, and we pray they will give us of their wisdom and other gifts vouchsafed to them by Lord Massia.

'On the day following the morrow, the day of the markets and the bartering, we will draw the people of our kingdom to hear the word this man has for us. In the meantime tell all those you know of this coming event. The criers will be out on the morrow in all provinces and they will tell all—great and small—of this visitation from Lord Massia, and we shall hear his word.

'Now finish your business and sleep well. You are dismissed'.

This dismissal did not prevent old and new friends pressing up against the Shemgridions, the joyous social fun and laughter which went on and the gratitude which so many expressed to Kanavah and Balwone.

Then the great hall emptied. Balwone scarcely noticed its rich furnishings and opulent furniture, but he did look at the kings and queens of some hundreds of years as they looked down over

this assembly of rejoicing people. The prince knew they would greatly approve of the happenings of this evening. He seemed almost to nod to them as he moved out and then went to his quarters.

Kanavah did not immediately return. He had been invited by some to a later supper, and there he regaled his hosts and new friends with tales of the battles which had taken place in Allein, the clear triumph therein of Lord Massia.

Later he looked in on Balwone, but that knight was fast asleep, and no dragon or giant dared visit him that night. His spirit slept with purity of conscience in the love of the Most High and his people of Mantria.

It was in the very early morning, slightly before dawn, that Balwone arose. His spirit was alert, alive with anticipation of good things to come, and invigorated from sleep and from the purification that comes to one when he has sung truth from the depths of his being, and is in rich communion with his Maker and all mankind—both friends and foes.

The portcullis was opened to receive the early morning's tradesmen and the immense amounts of food and drink for the palace. He was easily recognised by the servants who nodded to him pleasantly, some were still working by the light of tallow lamps. In the city also there were early movements of vendors preparing their wares for the day.

The air was pleasant though mixed with the headiness of night blossoms and the smells of vendors' spices and condiments. A faint mist dispersed, catching at Balwone's throat for a moment with an acrid sharpness, but by this time he was well into the city, the clean air of the day was filling the streets.

He noted that the quagmire filthiness of cities such as Cotillon and Endomin was not present. There were cobblestones, but gutters edged them and took away all effluent. Many of the houses appeared to be very old, ancient as the city itself, and a remembrance of the times of the old pagan customs. He passed what he believed were once the old pagan temples, but they had been converted into dwellings and fitted well with their companion houses in their architecture.

Balwone knew he was seeing what might have been called 'a Massia city', for the signs of houses of ill repute were not seen, and whilst there may have been poverty of a kind, it differed from the slum areas of other large cities he knew. Some folk were about, those who were on their way to do the work of servants, perhaps in the palace or in the homes of the richer folk or those successful in trade and commerce.

Once or twice he thought he was being followed, and remembering his time in the slums of Endomin he moved with carefulness. He had no sword or weapon with him and sensed no need to feel for the golden blade which generally served him in crises or attacks.

He began gently to hum a tune he loved, and this lulled him into a mood of serenity, so that when the attack came he was totally unprepared for it. He felt the impact of a blow on the back of the head and turned to see who was attacking him. His dazed eyes caught a glimpse of two men, both with heavy clubs, and as they swung a second time they missed because he had crumpled at their feet, and the pain was felt no more. He was unconscious, perhaps dead.

He did not see, then, that a great giant of a man seized the two attackers and, regardless of their clubs, beat their heads together, at which point they dropped their clubs and fled. The giant knight then picked up his friend Balwone and gently placed him across his shoulders and turned towards the drawbridge and the castle.

Balwone was by no means a lightweight, and had it not been Kanavah carrying him, it is doubtful that he could have travelled at the speed he was travelling. The big man did not let his tears flow, for his love was mixed with rage. He knew, now, how deep was that love, and he had a brief moment of understanding what is meant by the saying, 'The love of the Most High and his Lord Massia'. This love gave him unusual strength to bring the prince to the castle where others grasped his burden from him and all conveyed the body of the prophet to his quarters, where they laid it down upon the rush mattress.

By this time there had been calls for the palace man of medicine. Attendants washed the wound and applied cold compresses to the injured head. The physician could only shake his

head at the cruel gash which surely portended the death of the man. They washed the gaping wound and bound it up with fair white linen.

The palace guards were now searching the city for the offenders. It was certain the prince's death had been intended.

When the king heard of the news, he hastened to Balwone's room. There was a tender look in his eyes, and in the touch of his hand as he felt for the signs of life in the prophet's body.

When he stood he sighed deeply. 'Such did they always to the prophets', he murmured, leaving his guest in the hands of loving attendants.

Kanavah was deeply pained by the event which had happened, and he kept repeating the words of the king. 'Such did they always to the prophets', but his heart was cold with apprehension. He wondered how such a thing could happen in such a city, but he remembered the past cruelty of his own heart and understood—not that understanding eased the pain of his love.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Holy Convocation Is Announced

FOR HOURS the prince lay in a trance, and his breath was scarcely perceptible. A feather pillow had been placed under his head. The giant Kanavah stayed by his side. Once the king came and told that knight that he had sent out the criers to announce the convocation of the people on the following day.

‘Whether this prophet survives or not’, he said, ‘the day of holy convocation must still proceed. You, Kanavah, may have to take your companion’s place, and the other men will surely witness to the power of Massia, albeit our friend has been cruelly attacked. This happening will convince people that Mourna whom they called ‘Terrible’ is seeking to destroy this one whom the gods count dangerous. It is not the first time in our history that such has happened’.

At midmorning there were low moans from the knight, and once the eyes opened, the eyelids fluttered and then he drifted back into a state of somnolence.

‘It is a good sign’, said the physician who had not moved from his post. ‘Yet it is still not certain. A battle is going on within the prophet.’

Doubtless this was true, but Balwone was unaware of it. About noon he opened his eyes, and, whilst he could not fully focus them, he could make out the form of his friend Kanavah, who, seeing his companion move slightly, bent over him. The prince smiled, though he could not suppress the low moans which came as he moved his head. Once, he went to put up his hand to feel gingerly the lump at the back of his head. Because it was bandaged this was difficult.

The physician took his hand firmly and said gently, ‘Let be, Prince Balwone. Let be. It is best if you remain still for a time’. The prince drifted in and out of sleep, and late in the afternoon seemed healed enough to sit up and take nourishment of soup and plain water.

The king arrived, having asked to be called if Balwone were to come to a state of consciousness.

‘Praise be to the Most High’, he said fervently. ‘This is but a miracle that you have been restored to us.’ He assured the knight that he would not have to take part in the proceedings of the morrow.

‘The Knight Kanavah and your men of the plain green garb will be proficient enough to bring the message from on high.’

Balwone could only stare up in silence. In his heart he had determined that he would speak and sing at the festival of love which would take place. Though the pain persisted, he did not feel weak in his body.

He nodded as the king took his departure. He was sitting partly upright, supported by pillows, but when he tried to rise the pounding of pain made him subside. Some physic the physician had given him was dulling the pain, but was also making him drowsy.

He slept well into the night, and when he awoke the pain had gone. He was able to stand by the aid that Kanavah and the physician gave him. He tottered off to fulfil the need of his nature, supported by the knight, who then gently laid him down to sleep further.

In the morning, Kanavah aided him in his toilet. The prince dressed in his green garb, and broke his fast. Then he arose without help and stood at the mullioned window, looking out across the kingdom of Mantria.

‘I am healed’, he told Kanavah, ‘and now you must tell me what happened’.

The other knight was filled with relief at the quick recovery of his friend.

‘When you arose early yestermorn, I also rose and dressed. I had a sense of disquiet at your going. I followed you silently into

the city, but made sure you would not see me. Had I dared follow you more closely, I could have prevented those two rogues from attacking you. As it was, you had turned the corner into another street, and I waited before I did the same. I saw them come from a house nearby, and observed them rushing upon you. I ran to prevent them, but the deed had happened. I gave them a good knocking myself, but they dropped their clubs and ran. I was afraid that you might have been killed so I ran with your body to the palace.'

'It was a mercy', said Balwone. 'It must have been the red dragon who told them to do this devilry.'

'They shall be repaid', said Kanavah. 'Mourna shall see retribution.'

Balwone shook his head, though with carefulness for from time to time the pain would return. 'It is not their blood we seek, but judgment on the dragon and his slave Mourna the Terrible.'

The physician insisted on remaining with the two men. 'I have a heart for our prophet', he said. 'At all costs we must thwart further attacks. The holy convocation must go on.'

At first the two men watched with some wonder the folk streaming in from the countryside, and doubtless from other towns, villages and small hamlets. Some came on transport such as horses and donkeys, whilst others came on carts and larger horse-drawn vehicles. Most walked, but they seemed to be in festive mood, not minding the miles they had traversed. Some came pushing barrows on which their produce was piled. Others trundled low platforms pulled by donkeys on which were large pots and these brought milk, cheeses and butter. Others carried sacks made of skins and hides, whilst yet others carried nothing but small children, or led a cow or some single animal, whilst shepherds drove sheep or pigs or ducks. The two knights were fascinated by the cavalcade, and Kanavah opined that this nation was well blessed with produce of the earth and water and sky.

'How prudent a people', the large knight observed. 'How prosperous a kingdom.'

'I have been thinking', said Balwone, 'that we must ask Shemmalin and his men to come to us. Our quarters could hold them. Time is running out before the convocation which the king has set at the third hour after noon'.

The men came, clad in freshly laundered clothes. They had not changed their forest green for traditional Shemgridion garb, and this pleased the prince. To this point only Shemmalin had ventured into the knights' quarters. Now they all showed their delight at Balwone's recovery and mentioned they had been praying for his healing.

Balwone had had a thought in his mind over the morning, and it would not go away. He addressed a question to Shemmalin.

'Do we have, in this kingdom, instruments of wood that produce sweet air, and do we have those of metal which produce sharp or ringing sounds, and are there instruments similar to that which is called, I believe, elaina?'

'Elainas be here in this city', said the Shemgridion, 'and many there be who play them. There be also instruments such as lyres, the small harps and lesser stringed instruments. There also be other devices such as drums and cymbals and gourds. There be single drums and what we call "married drums"; for one is not played apart from the other'.

'This I confess', Balwone said, 'I can play no appliance for I have not been trained thus. The elaina I can play because this gift was passed on to me the night Nappali was martyred. It is a gift, and singing is a gift, but I wot that if we could encourage many to join us in the playing of these many devices, then would our worship be right and fruitful'.

'Have no fear', spoke Shemmalin. 'Such instruments will surely be played, whether called for or not. Likewise the multitude will share in the sacred singing. A holy convocation is a rare thing, and there is much interest in such. At these times the people believe the Most High will give indications of his Presence, and Massia no less will be portrayed in his Lordship.'

'This is indeed good news', said Balwone. 'Now we must talk about worship, for by midafternoon the crowd will be gathered.'

‘It will indeed’, said Shemmalin. ‘Meanwhile it would do you well, Prince Balwone, to meet the people in the market, if your health will permit that.’

‘It is Massia himself who leads all worship’, said Shemmalin. ‘My Lord Balwone will know that. Without such leadership we would soon have worldly ways of thinking and honouring the Most High. This is right, for men find him not in long speeches about him, but in being present when all come to venerate and adore him. Such pure adoration the gods and idols cannot draw forth from their devotees, for those deities are impure. Ours is therefore a worship beyond others.’

‘Then’, said Shemmalin, ‘there is the one who is the Spirit both of the Most High and his servant Lord Massia. He is the Spirit who aids true worship’.

When the meeting of the twelve had concluded, Balwone laid a hand on the right arm of Shemmalin.

‘I would hear you more on this one you call “the Spirit”. I have heard tell of him, and in the ancient writings there is much about him, but to this hour I have only thought of that one whom you call “him”, and not “it”. To my mind he is a power, an influence, and yet I have thought of him as more. Set forth now your understanding, for I am mightily moved at the thought of a Third One, One whom you call holy.’

‘Master’, said Shemmalin. ‘He is the One who is at one with the Most High and Massia. He is said to search the deeps of the great One, and also to so be at one with Massia, that he is the Spirit of them both. It is he who moves in the prophets and causes them to give forth the word.’

‘Ah!’ said Balwone. ‘He is the spirit of fire and water, and wind and oil and light! Of him I have read much. He was constantly the delight of Flamgrid who called him the Spirit of Love.’

‘The same’, said Shemmalin. ‘But for him, and his presence in you, Prince Balwone, you had no fire, no spirit and no golden sword.’

‘Then I know the same’, Balwone exclaimed with fervour and joy. ‘By him we have the breath of life, and from him comes the great adoration we have in our heart for the Most High.’

Shemmalin stood quietly whilst the truth of the Third One flooded the healed prince.

After a time, he said, ‘Now I will take leave of you, noble Balwone. We shall hear more of this Spirit during the holy convocation’.

Kanavah insisted he should visit the market place. Balwone still needed his bandage, and this might have made him conspicuous had people not been wearing all sorts of head gear as well as a variety of garbs. Shemgridions were perhaps the most prominent of all, and Balwone realised that Paelfric’s idea of a simple clothing was more to the point in Cathrid than in Mantria. People seemed not to see traditional Shemgridion garb as in any way distinguishing them as a sect or a tribe. It had been accepted that Shemgridions had a simple way of life, and they were respected for this, for in all things they acted as normal people.

Balwone and Kanavah had been fascinated when looking down at the people coming from all corners to visit the market and to barter. Now they were further spellbound by the market itself.

All kinds of food, clothing, furniture and articles were there. Some were displayed on barrows, or on rough boards with stones supporting them. Some were in large terracotta pots, some in great jars and leather containers; spun materials were draped everywhere. There was also a mixture of languages and dialects as sellers shouted their wares and others argued about the quality and price of various goods. Overall, the place was a mass of varying colours.

There were vendors selling food of every description, such as smoked meats and fish; bunches of onions, ripe and hanging with fluttering husks; dried herbs were hanging on poles and ropes. Cooked food tickled the noses of the knights, but they constrained themselves from eating. Fruits both dried and fresh were there aplenty.

They took the opportunity to chat, here and there, and no one recognised them as Balwone and Kanavah, mainly because that information was confined within the palace walls. Even so, they heard the name ‘Balwone’ mentioned here and there, which was

natural enough since the king had announced the holy convocation.

In places they met small bands of troubadours, whose songs and music seemed joyful. In the centre of the market place some dancing was proceeding, but the knights did not understand its significance, intrigued as they were by it.

After a time Balwone's head began to throb and he asked Kanavah to end their sightseeing and return to the royal castle, which they did. After a drink and a short rest, Balwone's pain faded, and he was comfortable.

By midafternoon a platform had been raised on the lawn of the common ground of the people and the king. Covering it was a tent which was flat of roof. It was in the Mantrian colours of blue and gold, but there was no bunting, no banners, and so no signs of festivity. For some reason which Balwone did not know, there were long boards, making rough tables, a sight he had not previously seen in Mantria. These were ranged on the north side of the common.

Folk were pouring on to the grounds from the market place, some having brought their goods with them, so that much of the colour of the barter place was transferred on to the turf of the common, contrasting with its fresh green. People were settling in groups, probably the social groups of families, clans and, possibly, of villages and hamlets. The parties with musical instruments had set themselves down in various places so that their playing and singing did not clash because of nearness to one another. Even now they were playing and singing.

Balwone and Kanavah had also settled on the grass, knowing that later they would be called to the platform. Their idea was the same one they had in going to the market place: to see and hear the people of Mantria, to listen to their conversation, to understand something of their culture and to be one with them, so far as that was possible. Now they were awaiting the appearance of King Clopelt, Queen Mercia and the members of the royal court.

Long before this happened, they were sought out by servants of the castle and taken back into it, being informed as they walked that their majesties wished first to speak regarding the

convocation and then accompany the knights, along with all courtiers, to the great meeting. As they walked towards the castle, they saw the tables were being stocked with loaves of unleavened bread and flagons of wine. When they asked the reason, they were greeted with curious smiles, as though their request was made humorously. The two men had to be content with this simple mystery. They supposed the people were to be given some kind of a ritual treat, a feast of sorts.

At the castle, all servants and courtiers were in the great hall, and with them the king and the queen and their grown children, who, in turn, had with them their own children, some of whom were approaching adulthood.

The king nodded to the two knights, bidding them come to him, and stand with him alongside the queen. As the two men approached, they sensed no hostility from the royal family, but only a quiet respect. All made way for the knights to take up their positions beside their majesties.

The monarch of Mantria addressed all, reminding them that the afternoon was unusual in that it was a holy convocation called because of the coming of Balwone, Kanavah and their party of Shemgridions. The king first enlarged on the fact that there had been a massacre of a village of Shemgridions in the kingdom of Zed and that Balwone had witnessed the barbaric act. The king also explained that the lower northern kingdoms were still pagan, that as yet they did not know much of the Most High and Massia, and at the same time were opposed to any change from their worship of the old gods. He named some of these, and there was a slight tremor of movement in the audience. Balwone assumed that there was a dislike of the old gods because of the proximity of the kingdom to Allein.

'Much of what I tell you now, I will repeat in a more detailed way during the opening of the convocation. It is, however, a special day because of the coming of Balwone the Great.' He gestured towards the knight with the fair linen bandage around his head.

'Unfortunately our visitor, Balwone the Prophet, was attacked early at the time of yestermorn, and at first we despaired of his life.

Now he is healed enough to lead us in the holy convocation. It may be that a second attempt will be made on his life, but various members of the guard will mingle with the assembled people and look for those who oppose the Most High and his servant.

‘As you know, we have had great times of worship, not only in our towns and villages, our hamlets and our homes, but here in Bekrift, and we expect wonderful happenings in our gathering together today. It may be that the Most High will give us great times of rich worship, such as we have not known in many a year, but yet knew in old times, in days long gone. Go now, and the blessing of Massia be with you. Keep the faith.’

They said in a chorus, ‘We will keep the faith of Massia’.

With that, the concourse of the royal family, all courtiers, servants and members of the guard moved from the palace, across the drawbridge and out into the city bailey, finally arriving at the city common. There was a fanfare of trumpets as the king and queen, with Balwone and Kanavah, ascended the covered platform. The Shemgridions were there also, ranged in front of the large dais.

The convocation of Mantria in the city of Bekrift was about to begin.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Great Day of Holy Convocation in Which a Nation Is Renewed

BY THE time the official party had reached the platform, the common was packed with people. The gaps between the groups were fully filled and a sea of faces was turned up to the Royal Party. At first they had remained seated on the grass, but then there was a common urge to rise, and soon the great crowd was on its feet and the Royal Party was warmly adulated.

Humanity when massed together often takes on another quality of being, and this Balwone sensed. Something rose in him like a hot fire, and his eyes misted with emotion. Kanavah was similarly taken with the same feeling, and he shook his head, as though to shake off something with which he could not contend. The prince saw a gleam in the eyes of the monarch as he stood and accepted the applause. When it died down, the king held up a hand to show he would address them. His words further moved the two knights and their friends the Shemgridions.

To the audience, now seated, Clopelt spoke thus: ‘Dear friends and brethren in Massia and the Most High. We are gathered for a momentous occasion, for, as you know, we rarely have holy convocation. Such a time is for special remembering of the Most High our faithful Creator and God. In your homes and in your weekly assemblies you worship him, speak to him, give requests to him and pray for others less fortunate than yourselves, and for those nations which have not yet come under the Lordship of Massia.

‘Today we have amongst us one who is a prophet, and of whom you have heard. To some he is known as “Balwone the

Great”, yet the man denies he has any greatness of himself. That he is great in Massia’s eyes shows that he has proved to be a faithful servant. He has been through many experiences, and eventually they have led to his coming to the feet of Massia. He has read much of the ancient wisdom, some of it of the old sages and interpreters, and much of it given by the Most High to his servants the teachers and prophets.

‘The kingdoms known as the lower northern kingdoms have lately been in conflict about the old gods and the Most High and Lord Massia, and as a result, persecution has been happening. Seeing the state of things to be thus, Prince Balwone has heard the voice of Massia instructing him to tell out the good news of the Most High to all the nations. Desiring to see nations in which Massia is Lord, he has planned to see Mantria, Frimpone and Cautria, but we believe that seeing these kingdoms is not the whole of the will of Massia, but that, on his way, this prophet should speak to us from the Most High, and renew our life in him, for many of us have become dull in the faith.

‘He and his blessed company have come through the forest of Allein.’ As he said this, a gasp went up from the crowd and it grew into a sigh.

‘They were opposed by the evil powers that have reigned there, but those powers were beaten back by this little company of the faithful. Now Allein is a domain released from its evil masters. I am told that the birds now sing, and the animals play as they did in ancient days. Those who go there to practice the old rites to the ancient gods will not find it to their liking. It is no longer the lair of the red dragon and Sarxia the great giant and all their lackeys.’

Again the gasp and the sigh, and there was also some clapping which died as Clopelt held up his hand.

The king said, ‘I tell you not these things to laud our friends who are with us, nor to praise Balwone, for he is but a servant of his liege Lord Massia. No, it is because Massia has sent his servant to proclaim to us those things we know, but in which we are not always diligent. I therefore ask all to stand and join with me in the Song of Mantria, our hymn to the Most High’.

The audience rose as though one person and sang their national song. Balwone and Kanavah marvelled at the swelling music, but they did not know what words to sing. The ten Shemgridions knew the words and sang with great joy.

*Most High by whom the worlds were made,
We bow before You.
Most High who brought us from the shade,
We worship You.
We who lived in darkness dread
Now praise Your name.
The Lord of light has shone upon us all
And freed from shame.*

*Most High, the God of love and peace,
Our hearts adore.
You sent Lord Massia to release
Us, slaves to You,
That we might live within Your love.
We praise Your Name,
We prisoners You released
Through Massia’s pain.*

*Lord Massia, Servant of the Father God,
You we all praise.
Great Warrior who fought evil powers
Who fled Your ways.
You cleansed us our sins on bloody tree
Who wounded You.
Life You have given to make us free,
And love that’s true.*

*Most High our nation stands before in awe
To worship and adore.
To serve forever You and Your great One,
Who is your Son.
To You alone we lift our nation’s voice;
In You are one,
Who are the people of Your sovereign choice.*

When the song ceased, there was a moment of silence before the crowd seated itself.

Even had the king not motioned him to do so, Balwone would have spoken at this point.

‘I perceive’, he said, ‘that you have a wonderful history. You are a privileged people. You have had hundreds of years of peace. Doubtless your forefathers had to suffer much in order to be freed of the tyranny of the ancient gods and the evil powers which inhabit them. You have ever lived close to the forest of Allein which was cursed with the cruelty of creatures who have strange powers and are grim and relentless. Even so, you have had that inner freedom of your spirits which makes for true living.

‘Doubtless you have had times of drifting from your first, passionate love of the Most High, and in his mercy he may have chastised you, for this he is wont to do. Compared to you, I am but a child in the faith, yet Massia has appeared to me and given me gifts and a golden sword which comes to me at such times as this. This weapon is the word of the Most High which destroys those who would oppose him, yet such action is still that of love, for it may eventually bring them to the Most High. Often when destroyed, such are brought to humility and faith and desire something better than they have had’.

Balwone, as he spoke, wondered how so many could be so still and look up at him with such responsive gaze. Was it superstition at his being a prophet—for he had no special powers, and was a creature as earthly as them all? Some of them were not responsive. They sat stiff and unreceptive. Some had eyes that blazed back, and he knew there was enmity in their midst. Perhaps the two who had tried to kill him were, even now, gazing up at him.

Drawn back to speaking, something happened to him which was startling and unbelievable. It was more than just a thrill or a tremor which ran through him. It was as though lightning had struck him, though he had never experienced that. Power flooded him in a manner never before known. His body almost shook with the impact of that power. His first thought was, ‘This is the

Power they call “the Spirit”. This is the One who floods with energy, and at the same time with love and joy and power’. It seemed that every part of him was called into action such as he had never before known. His mind’s eye saw innumerable visions, visions of the Most High in light ineffable, in glory that was brilliant but kindly. He had visions of Massia, standing in love, alert with power, a sword going out of his mouth, waters flowing from him, and he heard sounds that were of such beauty that his heart tingled with wonder, with a terror that was, in fact, holy awe. His whole being was as in a rhapsody.

Although he knew it not, this all happened in a whit of time, so that he knew he had been immersed in energy and beauty. Even so, the words he now uttered were ablaze with power which changed his manner of speech, and all sat forward. He saw puzzlement where there had been opposition, delight where there had been simple, passive acceptance.

Suddenly across the crowd there was something of a wind blowing, and some folk rose and held their hands high. Others almost moaned with the sweetness which came upon them. Others cried out words he did not know, and all were, it seemed, swaying as he spoke, as though in time with some music that he could not hear.

A group of singers arose and they cried, ‘He has come! He has come!’, and they could not contain their joy and their wonder, and Balwone heard the soft beating of a drum, and the sweet notes of wind instruments, and the gentle movement of strings as though a harp was nigh to weeping. Then, across the now hushed audience, stole a gentle song from one of the troubadour love bands.

The curious thing about all this was that it did not interfere with his speaking, nor with the hearing of his words. Eyes were on him, deeply entranced, and the music seemed like an accompaniment, even though it had a life and message of its own. He talked, telling them of the death that is in a man and a woman, and how one has to die a death to that death in order to come to life. Now he was no longer half-apologetic for his newness in Massia as against their centuries of knowing the Most High. His words were simple, but they came out of the wisdom he had

garnered over the years from the ancient manuscripts; from what Flamgrid, Facius and Merphein had taught him; and the experiences of suffering he had known from the evil of men and of his own heart. It was as though this spirit which had come to him to fill and flood his own spirit, had, at the same time, given him a perspicuity, a clear vision and penetrating understanding of all things, so that he, for these rich moments, had the wisdom of the Most High in him and so comprehended all things. He knew that something was pouring out of his own heart and flooding into the hearts of others. It came to him that this was the prophetic ministry gifted to him from above, and that he could not but use it.

He saw some of those who had gazed at him with opposition now jump up, put their hands to their ears and flee through the people. Some of them cried as they ran, and Balwone perceived they could not tolerate his words. There was no golden sword by his side, for it was in his mouth, and his words were golden and the edge of them sharp as a razor.

Clopelt and Mercia were standing, and with them all courtiers rose, and round the platform the Shemgridions of Cathrid were raising their voices in a song, and Balwone knew it as the song he had heard Nappali sing that wonderful, but fateful, night in Zed, and so he opened his own mouth—preaching and teaching of the other kind almost forgotten—and he sang, and as he sang he even outsang the rich baritone of Kanavah, and his voice was almost the voice of Deity as he poured out his soul in adoration of Massia the suffering, Massia the redeeming, Massia the beloved of those whose lives he touched.

It was as though Nappali was again present, for the same pathos, anguish, sorrow was present in the singing of the Cathrid company. There was also the same sweet loveliness, the peace, the joy and the outflooding love. The song had scarcely been concluded when it began again, and, as though all the words were printed on their minds and hearts, the great crowd sang with the men from Cathrid. Each troubadour band was now in full action. As Balwone's hands swept across the strings of his elaina, so the accompanying throb came from the drums, partly muted so that the lovely tones of wind and string instruments might make up the passionate whole. Softly, softly came the

percussion and the rhythm of the cymbals, and the rattling of gourds. In that moment, all tasted afresh the power of music, as though every soul yearned for it, and was at peace only when it came to them in this pure way.

There was again that gentle swaying as though a soft breeze was enlivening and moving all. It was the movement of unity, and was expressed richly in the communal singing. On and on it went, and a thousand different visions were vouchsafed to different ones, and the cries of liberation came from many who were now worshipping the Most High in ways Mantria had not known in a long time.

Finally, a huge sigh swept over the crowd, and they stood as though hearing a voice, and the waves of the unseen sea were stilled, and the hearts of the worshippers were filled to overflowing. It was then the Royal prayer was prayed, and all knew that the whole nation was one. Balwone listened to the rich praise and petition of the king who prayed for his people with the love that a shepherd has for his flock, and who would have them fed and cared for, tended by love and joy and peace.

'And now', said the king, 'we will share our unity in the communion of love'.

He nodded and a group of courtiers moved towards the rough boards on which there were platters of unleavened bread and silver goblets of the castle. The courtiers waited in silence for the king to nod to them. First he prayed the blessing of the Most High on the bread and the wine.

'This is the communion, this is the fellowship of the great covenant of God made real to his people in the death of his Son, the blessed Massia. Through bread and wine we are one family, one people, one spirit with the great and glorious Creator under whose hands are all the earth, the great forests, the seas, the minds and the spirits of all men.'

He raised both hands as though in blessing. 'In Massia we are one.'

The crowd responded. 'In Massia we are one.'

The king said, 'In Massia we are one with the Most High'.

All repeated, 'In Massia we are one with the Most High'.

Then the courtiers began breaking the bread into fragments. These some took to the people whilst other courtiers followed with the gleaming silver cups of red wine.

All partook in a gentle silence.

Balwone was moved deeply in his spirit, and Kanavah likewise. The people were in the same spirit.

All saw the king as their great shepherd, and behind him stood, though unseen, the greater Shepherd of this beloved flock.

Some in the flock wept at the miracle of the Most High and of all humanity being one together.

When the distribution was finished, the king stood like some ancient patriarch, with his arms raised as he gazed towards heaven. He invoked the blessing of the Most High.

When the prayer ended, there was a whispered 'Amen' and all stood to reverence the withdrawal of the court. This was not to be in full, for the royal couple walked together to the crowd, talking with the people, and sharing the freshness in faith which had come to them and to their nation. Kanavah had his arm around his friend, and stood with him as they both watched the courtiers also joining with the people. The small bands of troubadours were making music and song. Shemmalin crossed to talk with them.

'All night, now, they will sing', he said. 'Some will go home of necessity, but others will stay on this common and sing and pray and worship, and ask their pastors and leaders to tell them more of what you, Balwone, have told them this evening.'

He smiled. 'Great has been the renewal of Mantria and great will be the renewal of these upper northern kingdoms. This blessing will flow on into Cathrid, and the other kingdoms. It is such a tide that none can stem it.'

After a time the king joined them. Queen Mercia was talking with some of her ladies.

'You have lit a fire, Balwone', said the king, 'and we are grateful for this. Long have we needed these rivers of refreshing'.

'It is the beginning of a new time', said Balwone. 'Our life is one of faith in the Most High and Massia, and if we lag in our faith, then their reign and rule also seems to lessen, and it is as though we have lost sight of them, and even as though they do

not exist, or, if they exist, that they are weaker than the gods of the idols. Idols we can see, and so we need no faith. Such a time as we have had this day renews our faith, and makes communion with the Most High an experience of reality. What is unseen is not unfelt and what is unseen is even greater than what is seen.'

The king nodded his head in agreement. 'And now, Prince Balwone, I have a request to make of you. Leave, I beseech you, four of your doughty Shemgridions. I believe they have come for such a time as this, and with the purpose of teaching our leaders and people.

'As you go on to Frimpone, take your remaining company and there, if blessing should again break out, leave three with King Antipal and his people. As then you go to King Haelfric of Cautria, so leave your remaining three Shemgridions with him. You and Knight Kanavah should arrive, then, in Cathrid in time for the Festival of the Seasons. In this way we will all keep the faith, and the Most High shall be honoured.'

Balwone thought on this. He understood, now, why it had been decided that he should bring the ten Shemgridions with him.

'It is as you say, Your Majesty', the prince said. 'Also we will, with your permission, set out tomorrow for Frimpone and the city of Antipone.'

'If that is your pleasure', said Clopelt, 'then it is ours also. We would wish to send an escort with you to the border, to defend you against those who would desire to take your life. If needs be they could go with you until you reach Antipone'.

Balwone smiled and looked heavenwards. 'His powers, King Clopelt, will cause us to arrive at our appointed destination.'

The king also smiled. 'As you wish, dear Balwone, so let it be.'

Balwone bowed. 'Then we shall take our leave now from you, Sire, for we will be away before dawn as is our custom, that time may be saved.'

'I will be with you at the time of your departure', the king said. 'You have become beloved of us, and our nation will sing the praises of Massia and the Most High for many a day.'

The two departed, and Balwone and Kanavah went to talk with their Shemgridion friends.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Eight Men on the Road to Antipone, and a Meeting with a Creature of Light

TWO DAYS' travel brought them to the edge of Frimpone, and on the third day they had entered the kingdom. They entered it by way of a narrow pass, for the undulating pastures of Mantria had given place to hills that were ancient, in which large, smooth boulders had embedded themselves, and around which grew stunted trees and shrubs, and all kinds of flowers. Amongst all this, mountain goats grazed or stood on rocky outcrops and gazed down upon the newcomers to their land.

They saw houses built into the side of the hills, with roofs that were made of wattle and daub, and these roofs rested upon sturdy timbers cut from the surrounding hills. The front and side walls of the houses were made of masonry built out of the boulders and smaller, smooth rocks. The small party would have wished to stop and share with the inhabitants, for these hills seemed so serene, and they would also have wished to know of the state of faith of the people, but the Festival of the Seasons was before them, and they could not tarry.

Shemmalin was now the constant companion of the prince, riding with him throughout the day. Kanavah was fast learning the ways of the Shemgridions, and at night, when he and Balwone would converse, he told of his spiritual adventures with these men of the Most High.

'They have wondrous dreams and visions', he said. 'Often during the day they become weary, for their hearts are always in prayer for the people they love, and no less for the people of

these kingdoms, and in the time of night they are refreshed by these dreams and visions from the Most High and Lord Massia.'

'That, too, I know', replied Balwone. 'In the days of my apprenticeship with Flamgrid, I would have dreams and visions by which I was enabled to keep to the life of holiness, young and immature as I was. To me, also, the Lord vouchsafes visions in the night and my spirit rises. To you, Kanavah, he will give such dreams, to keep fresh in your heart his love for you, and your love for him.'

They had set out from Mantria in the early morning, before dawn, and King Clopelt was there to bid them farewell. At the moment of their going, he had raised his aging hands in benediction over them, and as cool as was the morning, warm was his blessing on them. They had scarcely contained their emotions as they stirred their horses into action and moved off towards the hills of Frimpone.

'There, in Frimpone, your hearts will be delighted', said Clopelt, 'for their land is the Land of the Singing'.

Later, when Balwone asked Shemmalin what was meant by 'the Land of the Singing', the elder told him, 'Frimpone is a land of singers. So many seek from childhood to sing the songs of the Most High and his servant Massia, and so they have a treasury of beautiful ballads and love-songs, and many aspire to write their poems, and so their worship is a rich and living one. Yes, Balwone, you will be greatly enriched as you visit this nation'.

As they rode, it was Shemmalin who pointed to the path ahead, and the higher hills which then gave way to mountains, on the peaks of which snow could be seen as a white capping against the dark green of the forest giants.

'Along these paths came men of old in whose hearts were the psalms and hymns and spiritual songs the Most High had given them, and they sang where now we ride, and around them were the hosts of dragons and giants and demons who sought to block their way, and who often destroyed the holy men out of their hatred for them. Beautiful, then, as were these hills, they were dark with worship of the evil powers. They were simple men, the proclaimers who brought the good news, but in their spirits

they were giants, and they overcame as we did in Allein and set the banner of Massia floating over these hills.’

Through the words of the Shemgridion, there came to Balwone a wonderful sense of the mysterious past. These saints had been harbingers of light and bringers of life, and in his heart he felt an anguish for all the northern kingdoms. He thought to himself, ‘Here, on these hills, I am not an apostle, but a prophet. In the lower kingdoms, Massia will make me an apostle, a delegate of the Most High, and I shall proclaim him and his wisdom as never before I have done’. His heart now beat wonderfully and he held his head high, and looked about the hills which were the domain no longer of evil powers, but of Massia.

It was at that time he was given a vision, when the full light of day and of the sun was upon them all. They, too, saw what Balwone saw, and this was a remarkable thing.

A great light shone in the sky, so that at first none could see, but their mounts seemed not to have known of this light and were not blinded. They kept up their steady trotting.

Out of the centre of this light emanated waves of brilliant shining, and they seemed to compass the whole of the heavens. The horses kept them moving east, but the light in no way was perceived by them.

Then, in the centre of that light was a great and splendid creature, the beauty of whom deeply affected and impressed the seers. They had an impulse to worship, but refrained. They wondered whether this could be their Massia, a manifestation of him in shining beauty, but something in their hearts told them this was not so.

A voice came to them in great tones. ‘I am the true angel of light. I am the ancient one who was before ever the world was made. I was one with the Most High and he delighted in the beauty he had created which was me. Glory was given me above many, and it is my light which lights the world, these hills, these lands and out to the ends of the world. I am the Wise One who was given wisdom beyond the wisdom of others. I am the Eternal Sage.’

Balwone resisted the impulse to bow and worship, to fall down from his horse and make obeisance to this glorious creature, a denizen of the heavens. He saw behind this one, and arising from his shoulders, huge wings, and he realised this One could sweep through the heavens as no large eagle could. Something within himself quivered with appreciation, and this verged on adoration. At the same moment he wondered why the party had been vouchsafed this vision in the bright day.

‘Look about you, mortals’, said the angelic creature, ‘and see these hills. From time immemorial I have been Master of these. My people have worshipped me, devotees at my shrines. I am the High One who controls their lives, their times, their crops, their animals and their destiny. Through lesser lords than I, whom I have made, I control all these lands, not only in this north, but to east and to west and to south’.

‘Then you must be Massia’, said Balwone, ‘for he is Lord over all’. As he said these words Ballia lifted up his magnificent head and snorted. As though this were the proper thing to do the other mounts followed Ballia.

But then the prince of Manignia said, ‘I have seen Massia, for he has vouchsafed me a vision of himself, and he is not like unto you. Who then, truly, are you?’.

‘I am a son of the Eternal’, said the creature, ‘but I have risen to be as the Most High himself. All the kingdoms have been given into my hand and I rule with him’.

‘All the kingdoms’, said Balwone, ‘belong to Massia, for he suffered in death and he triumphed in life to win these kingdoms for the Most High, for by creation all kingdoms are his, and by his earthly accomplishment Massia has won back those kingdoms which were filched from him’.

‘Not filched’, said the glowing being before them, ‘but won by my higher wisdom, higher than the Most High was prepared to give to humanity. Through my powers, given by the Most High, I aided men to become gods and to know the freedom of their inner spirits’.

‘Then you be the one the ancients called Lucifer.’

‘Ah, yes’, was the calm reply. ‘Son of the Morning, Great Light Bearer, the Manifestation of All Beauty. I have come to

shine upon you and give you light such as you have never before known. In my light you will see true light, and such light you will become in yourselves.'

'That cannot be', said Balwone, 'since we have already become light in Massia. You must therefore be the opponent of our Lord, an imposter, magnificent though you show yourself to be. Your light, though it seems to be light, must indeed be darkness'.

'Prince Balwone', said the shining being, 'you must move on from your impoverished dreams and visions. Out here, where I am, full light dwells. You have been confused and weakened by this Massia. He cannot give you the wisdom to know all things, to know what is the good and what is the evil'.

'Ah!' said Balwone, 'Now you have given me a petard by which I can blast you away. Long have the holy ancients, the truly wise ones, told us that to know good is to be cast down into the hell of burning remorse, for none can rise to such heights as the good. To know evil is to be evil, is to be immersed and immolated in its dark horror. Therefore, whoever you may be, think not to impede the work of Massia with your temptations of beauty and of light. Forsooth, they are but ugliness and darkness. Thus far the Most High gives his servants a sense of what is good and what is evil'.

With what seemed to be infinite patience, the brilliant creature smiled on the prince. 'How deceitful is the wisdom that stops short of a destiny of total liberation', he said. 'You say you are servants of the Most High and of Massia, but indeed you are but slaves. Your wills are not your own. You cannot let your minds range free in all things. Nothing is yours for yourself. Think, then, of what I offer you, and receive it and be free.'

In a moment Balwone saw the real deceit. 'You are but a small reptile who emerges from the broken egg of false love. You would save the world from slavery, but are the greatest slave-master of all time. You would win all by your wisdom, but your wisdom is but as dust. The simplest peasant could unmask you for all your vaunted beauty. You bring freedom to none, but would have all as your lackeys, and you exact the highest price for what you call freedom, and that is perpetual worship of you and your evil system.'

The false prince of light seemed unperturbed by the words of the prince.

'You have just come from a great deceit', he said. 'You have had a time of holy convocation, but in fact it was unholy, for it was untrue. Your power, and the excitement it caused to raise up enthusiasm, was a human power and not divine. What you have wrought is but on the human level and must fade and die. The songs and the music were of man, and not of supernatural origin. Thus the work you think you have done is but a deceit. In a few days it will evaporate, and the kingdom shall become dull and lifeless as ever it has been since the real lords and gods were dispossessed by the one you call Massia.

'Your much travelling will also be fruitless in Frimpone and in Cautria, for I have many servants who will undo your false teaching. It is best, then, that now you give over to me. I will see to it that nothing you teach shall be lost like steam out of a boiling pot.'

For a moment, Balwone knew a stab of despair. Was it true that his proclaiming and the worship of the joyful people of Mantria was a chimera, a mist soon to be dissolved by reality? Then he withdrew such thoughts. He remembered the joy and peace and love that had flowed in the worship, and which had been sealed by the breaking of bread and drinking of wine. Such joy no human power could create, and such love as had bound that great multitude together, no, nothing human could make that to be. This evil creature, more evil because of its assumed beauty, must be defeated in its present seduction, and unmasked for what it was.

Beneath him, Balwone could hear the clapping of the horse's hooves on the stony path. Around him the beauty of the hills was swallowed in this all-consuming light which the prince now knew to be false. For a moment, he felt at his side for the sword, but it was not there. Even so, he had no fear. Whether he imagined it or not, he seemed to see light issue from his mouth in a shaft more brilliant than that other which was before him. This was the golden sword become word.

'You would obstruct our going', he said to the one the ancients called 'Lucifer'. 'You would win your kingdom back

that Massia has wrested from your hands, and you are afraid that we will bring even more renewal than this kingdom has known over the centuries. In the Name of the Most High and the Name of Massia, we bid you begone. Our mounts have not lost one step through your self-given vision, nor will they lose one whit of time by this your action. Begone, I say!

Afterwards, the men said they heard a terrible cry and what sounded like the whiplash of anger, but Balwone saw nothing but the visible fading of the creature of light who was, indeed, the creature of utter darkness. With his going, all horses neighed as though in triumph, and the birds of the air suddenly became both an orchestra and a choir of joy. Their music went through the hills. If possible, the sun in the east shone even more brightly, and the spirits of the eight men rose until they could do naught but sing a ballad of triumph, in which they ascribed all greatness to their Rock, the Most High, and all honour to their Prince, Massia.

*Our Most High, he is the Rock,
And never this Rock shall turn to dust.
He is th' Eternal who is love,
And in his righteousness is just.
The hills may fade, the oceans dry,
But he for ever is Most High.*

*Our Most High, he is the One,
And ever this one shall holy be,
Till all that's dark and evil dark
Be caused by Massia to flee.
Massia the Servant, in his death,
Has brought to all the holy Breath.*

*Our Most High, he is the Lord,
And ever this Lord shall put to flight
The denizens of darkness grim
Who flee the brilliance of his light.
Massia's sword shall freely move
To show the power of his love.*

*Our Lord Most High, he is the Rock,
And never this Rock shall turn to dust.
He is the Lord of life and peace,
And in his faithfulness we trust.
As pilgrims now we forward go,
With him whose love we see and know.*

After a short time of riding, the men stopped for a breaking of their fast. Normally the occasion of a frugal meal, they drew from the saddlebags the plentiful victuals Clopelt had given them for their journey.

'Let us make this a banquet of joy', said Balwone. 'A foretaste of that banquet of victory our Lord shall one day call us to. This day we have seen the enemy in his disguise of light, and we have not been deceived. This is the grace of the Most High and we will celebrate it.'

Having broken their fast, the men relaxed in the grove they had selected for the meal, and for some moments they rested, closing their eyes and taking a nap. When they woke they found themselves wonderfully refreshed by food and drink, by the presence of Massia, and by the gift of triumph he had given into their hands.

As they travelled further, the hills became higher. The track on which they rode became increasingly steep. To their right, that is, to the south, they saw the hills becoming mountains. They saw the woodlands below which were composed of many trees they knew, oaks and elms and yews, but above these grew the tall deodars and conifers. The highest peaks were far to the south and they remembered they had been told that Frimpone was inaccessible from the northern borders of Zed and Cathrid, and, in part, Manignia. They saw how difficult it would have been to climb these peaks and have food sufficient to bring them into Frimpone.

Again, the small party was deeply moved, remembering that it followed in the tracks of the patient, but powerful proclaimers of the Most High and Massia. This had been many centuries before.

'I feel we are riding on the top of the world', said Kanavah.

'That we are', said Shemmalin. 'And it is by his mercy that this is so.'

They sought to press on to the plains and eventually to arrive at Antipone, the city of the kingdom, but the men realised how much their horses had been driven, and that they must rest them, so they sought a place of protection off the narrow track. As the evening drew in and the forest darkened, they saw through the trees, nearby and across the valleys, the glowing of tallow lights, and were cheered. To them it was a parable; the little lights of Massia that were witness to his power to keep and enlighten the feeble.

Aware that these hills would be surely filled with wild animals such as wolves and lions and bears, they made sure they were secure, lighting their fires for food as well as protection, and they supped with great joy and thought wonderfully of the morrow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Holy Adventures in the Land of Frimpone

AS USUAL during the night, the men kept watch in turn. Not only were they aware of the presence of wild animals, but also of the possibility of attack by robbers and bandits who would not hesitate to kill if their numbers and strength were greater than that of the company of Massia. Also the fat wallet of the wisdom of the ancients—those invaluable manuscripts—was a priceless treasure.

In this natural grove, surrounded by high rocks, none could rush upon them. At the southern end, where it was open, they had placed great piles of briar bushes which they had cut and laid as a wall of defence. Even so, intruders by stealth could come and, sitting upon the high, surrounding rocks, hurl arrows down at them, and also, for that matter, the loose, smooth boulders that abounded. They had built a ring of fires so that no wild animal would venture into their circle. They had laid heavy logs upon the fire, and after a few hours they were ringed by solid piles of hot ashes. The Shemgridions who knew these heights, knew how cold it could become in the night, and how penetrating were the winds which blew off the snow-capped peaks further south. The men would have been chilled to the bone had they not lit their fires, no matter what loose clothes they had piled over themselves.

Balwone and Shemmalin took the first watch, each wrapped in a heavy cloak, and from time to time sipping the mild herbal tea which warmed them inwardly. Night deeply affects men who are thrown together, and no less when they hear the snores or heavy breathing of their companions. So, on this occasion, the two men spoke most freely.

Shemmalin gave the history of his people, telling how their race had been nomadic from time immemorial. They had been related to the people known as 'the covenant people', that ancient race of the Most High, who even now were in exile from their ancient land, but who had, many of them, departed from the pure worship of the Most High, thus causing their exile—land originally given to them by their God.

The Shemgridions had followed the ancient gods, but had mixed with their veneration the worship of the Most High. 'Most High' to them had meant that there was only one true God, but that there also existed servants of this deity—some of them deities and lords—who served the One above them.

'It was a strange mixture of lords and gods we worshipped, for each deity demanded allegiance to itself. We believed, as many now believe in the lower kingdoms of the north, that the High One had created by means of the lesser gods, as he, himself, could not demean himself by doing acts of personal creation. Thus we believed it was expedient for us to worship those gods who were closest, who helped us in war, gave us fertility in our families, our flocks and our soil. The Most High became so distant from us that we greatly feared him and were reluctant to spend much time in worshipping him. Moreover, we felt the lesser lords and idols were close to us, and would intercede for us powerless mortals wherever and whenever that was needed.

'As you can understand, there grew up a class of priests and sorcerers who burdened our lives with serving the gods. In all kingdoms there were groves where we worshipped, or temples and shrines which were built at much cost, and our lands abounded with evil spirits and huge, menacing creatures which held us in thrall.

'Into this state of affairs came the ancient worshippers of the Eternal, men and women, to teach us of the Most High. In the beginning they were as harsh as our priests and sorcerers, for they sought to get us to destroy our temples, shrines and groves, and gave us nothing in their place but what they called the pure worship of the Most High. They made little impact upon us except to leave families and small groups here and there who sought to imitate their kind of worship. Perhaps they were

intended to be precursors to the coming of Massia's messengers, who even beyond what these ancient people of the Most High taught, brought beautiful revelations of the One whom we have now come to see was the true Creator of all things, and the True Provider. He alone could give us the fertility we implored of the lesser gods, since he was Maker-over-all.'

Shemmalin paused, staring into the fire, unmoved by the sounds of wild animals further back in the hills with their roarings and their snortings. Even those closer to them with their rustling, squealings, gruntings and coughings were as unheard by him.

'What wonderful days they were when these servants of light first came to tell us that we needed no longer to fear the tyrannous gods, or the cruel dragon and his minions, as also the lackeys of the other dragons—the dark spirits who would never let us rest in peace. That was when much changed for us. Our hearts were warmed by the news the messengers brought of the Most High as the Father of all, and whose Son, Massia, was as loving as the Father, and had come to bring us peace in our consciences, and freedom from the guilt that disturbs all men and women, everywhere, and down through all time.

'At first this was a mystery unbelievable to us, but gradually it penetrated, and then it became a reality. So, from being a rather serious people who sought religious orgies to give us a certain pleasure, we turned to the real joy and peace of life lived for the Most High under our beloved master, Massia.'

When he ceased speaking, Balwone felt that the various elements of wisdom he had read and lived over the years now appeared in a richer, more wonderful light. He carried that sense of things into his sleep, he and Shemmalin having been relieved by the next watch.

The next morning they were somewhat late in moving off. All had huddled under their coverings until the light of the dawn had broken on them. Their ablutions they carried out under a delightful, but small cascade nearby. The night sounds had given way to the rustles and scuffles of day animals, and the rich songs of birds.

The sun broke on the southern mountains, flashing to them shafts of silver light. Finally, having broken their fast, they were on their way down the stony mountain track. Again, they saw the little flowers that grow on mountain heights, heard the glorious morning songsters and, out above the deep valley, saw the majestic circling of the large-winged eagle.

What they had not anticipated was meeting the hill dwellers, the mountain people of Frimpone who had remained, for the most part, hidden. They had saluted a number of them the day before, but they were unprepared, as they descended through the strong smell of pines, to see a crowd gathered on one of the rare, open and level places on the lower slopes. This spot of turf was the first open space in what was to become, below them, a terrace of cultivated gardens and pastures.

‘They are calling us to halt’, said Shemmalin. ‘They wish to speak to us.’

Even as he spoke, the party from Cathrid could hear sounds of music and singing. To his surprise, Balwone saw some men had elainas in their hands, to say nothing of other instruments. Shemmalin had told him previously that the people of Frimpone were famed for their love of festivals, folk dancing, music and singing. Here now was a gathering of men, women and children, all clothed in the garb that fitted the coldness of the heights— leather jackets, trews and furred headgear. The flowing robes of the women were of a green which matched the forest trees, yet the clothing was relieved by reds and yellows and blues.

When their leader Crimpone realised Balwone did not understand the local dialect, he launched into the lingua franca of the northern kingdoms.

‘Inwit has taught us, great prince’, he said, ‘that you have much to say which is valuable for us humble hill dwellers. We have heard there will be holy convocation in the city of Antipone, but we rarely go to the plains. We are a people of our own, and we rarely feel drawn to those who dwell on the plains and in the towns.’

‘Inwit also tells us that if you were to teach us here, where we dwell, that great enlightenment would now come to us. We ask, therefore, that you tarry some hours with us and speak to us,

since you are the prophet Balwone, and the words of a true prophet are always living and life-giving. They are always fresh’.

‘Then you are people of the Most High?’ asked the prince.

‘That we are’, Crimpone replied, ‘but the richness of worship has waned in our midst. In earlier days we were quite aflame with the message of Massia, but that flame is now but low burning coals. In these hills there is always a thrust to return to the old mysterious worship of the ancient gods, and many of their songs have remained within our hearts; poems and tunes which are mightily attractive, and often we cannot but sing them. We have a fear that our children will absorb more of that kind of music and dancing, and will prefer it to our beautiful songs and psalms of worship. Those songs, sire, contain our great history, and to cease to sing them is, for our children, to lose their wonderful history.’

‘Not only are some of us attracted to the mysterious nature of the ancient god-worship, but also others have turned away from any kind of god. All people need to see their god acting powerfully in the days of their lives. Most that we do is explained by natural laws, for our gods are natural, or maybe no gods do anything. Their supposed actions are the dreams of our minds.’

‘These are things we think about on our cold nights when we sit before our wood fires, or perhaps when we roam the hills during the day. At this time we are in a hunger for seeing Massia and hearing his voice’.

Balwone caught the catch in the other man’s voice, and the faint look of desperation in his eyes.

‘Are you, then, a shepherd to this flock? Do you have to pastor them? Do you feel their pains and their oft bewilderment, and sometimes their apathy and despair? I would surely stay with you awhile, but, unfortunately, we have not yet been received by your king and his court, and it may be thought we are rude and presumptuous in speaking to others before we reach the royal city.’

‘Aye, Lord Balwone’, said Crimpone the pastor, answering the knight’s questions first. ‘I feel these things deeply.’ He plucked at the prince’s jacket. ‘Stay and be a prophet to us. My flock is hungry, and my people are needy. I am not the perfect

pastor, and all pastors need prophets from time to time to help their flocks. It is well; I know that King Antipal would wish you to tarry awhile with us, that we may see a flash of that golden sword Lord Massia gives to his servants in their hour of need.'

The warm burning within his mind and heart came then to Balwone, and he knew he must needs stay and speak. All caught the nod of his head, and at that moment the music swelled and the folk settled themselves on the grass of the hills, and their eyes were no longer on the far mountains, but on the prophet. Some were eager for his word, and others were not, choosing to be watchers rather than hearers, and this Balwone knew, but he did not seek to change their manner of being. Long since Massia had showed him what was, and always is, in the hearts of human creatures.

He did not bid them sing a song, not even one of their own choice, for when Crimpone walked with him to where all were seated, they burst spontaneously into what must have been one of their most ancient lyrics. By now Balwone knew the songs that were ancient and those that were new. The very way of the music and the kind of words, told him clearly. So he listened, and as now the ability had grown in him, so he joined with them in their singing.

As they heard him, along with the competent Shemgridions and the warm-hearted Kanavah, the pace of their singing increased. They paused not for one song, or even for a choosing of the next, but song flowed into song, and then into further songs, until the crisp, clear air of the hills was ringing with their joy, their awakened adoration, so that soon they were in worship, and, Balwone knew, in communion with the Most High.

Balwone had come to know that such adulation not only prepares the heart for the prophetic word, but, in fact, is always part of that communication. Today his spirit was high, but he saw at the same time that there were those who were low in spirits, numb—some of them—with pain and suffering, and some quite dry from the doubts which chased one another perpetually through their minds. The knight was not a man who chose to speak on a subject as some teachers do, but to let flow through

him the word Massia would have for his flock, for the Lord Massia himself was the great and high Shepherd of the universal flock.

'Come!' he cried, through the gentleness of his heart and mind. 'Come! Remember joy. Remember delight. Remember the endless gifts of life, especially life itself, and then all the gifts that make it be full life. Think not on the sufferings and sorrows until pity choke your breath. Look at what Massia has done to free us from past pain and shame, and heal the wounds which are sore within us.'

Crimpone was staring at him, fascinated, for in a few words the prince had gathered the burdens of the hill folk, and come to the heart of their troubles and of their needs.

Balwone spoke on about the Lord Massia who loved them and was there to heal them. Indeed he had healed them, so long ago, as some would remember, and as others would have to remember now, and by faith.

The prophet's eyes flashed, and it seemed where he looked, as also wherever he did not look, that his words were indeed the flashing golden blade of Massia, bright to behold and death to sorrow and doubt. When he had finished he knew them to be a renewed people. Their songs, ever so rich before, became more exalted, as though supernal. They could no longer remain seated but rose and gave full expression to their relief and its accompanying joy. The once dark knight, Kanavah, also arose, and, as it were, almost outpaced them. They took further courage from him, and when they saw their pastor weeping with delight, they were even further enlarged in endurance.

Balwone called for silence, and in such quietness they stood, looking at him.

'Our little company must needs go now', he said, 'and you, too, must let us go. Much has happened in our hearts, and by worship we know that Massia is living and with us. Such joy is the assurance of his presence'.

Balwone knew that some who had been downcast, and others who had been nigh on surly, were no longer of this mind.

Before he could say more, Crimpone came forward. 'Beloved Master', he said, 'we shall not let you go alone. We, too, will come

with you. We will quickly set our homes and flocks to right, and ere you know it, we will be following. We will go to holy convocation. It is true that we note the differences between ourselves and those of the plains and towns and Antipone City, but we will arrive, bringing with us the freedom that has come to us this day’.

There was a rousing cheer, a hasty breaking up of the group, so that soon the party from Cathrid was alone. Having already been prepared for the long trek to Antipone, that city they could now just see in the east, they stirred their mounts and the two silver hounds, and made their way back to the stony track that led down to the plains. As they went they could see, through the thinning trees, the mountains to their left, still capped with the perpetual snow. Ahead of them the same brilliant sun which had been with them for the most part since they had left Cathrid. Now it flooded the green of the rolling pasture, and the clumps of trees which acted to break the cold wind from the cattle and the houses. The farm houses and byres were a sheer white, and their roofs a deep red. Not the red cattle of the lower northern kingdoms were seen, but the black and white stock which were big-boned, hardy and, as they had seen in Mantria, high-yielding milkers. When they rode into the prairie country, ground larks and others birds rose up before them. Quail there were in plenty, and just above them peregrine falcons hovered and swooped, whilst above all were the great eagles, three of them in all, floating marvellously, seeking to sight their prey before they began their swift and silent dives.

Kanavah generally rode at the rear, partly to digest the things he was learning, partly to meditate—a wholly new experience for him—and partly to protect the team from his vantage point. Looking behind him, he saw something which animated him, spurring him into action. From his normal, steady canter he flicked his mount into a gallop and was soon beside the other knight.

‘Look, Balwone!’ he shouted, and Balwone’s gaze followed Kanavah’s directing hand.

There, not very far behind them, were horsemen riding rapidly. Not until they drew near could they be distinguished.

Shemmalin had turned in his saddle, and he looked across at the two knights.

‘Our Frimpone hillsmen’, he said. ‘They are coming to conduct us into the city. The other men, with the women and the children, will make it more slowly, but they will have packhorses carrying their gear. It looks as though they are all coming to share in holy convocation.’

‘Look again!’ cried Kanavah, ‘Look ahead!’.

At first Balwone could not discern the horsemen who were advancing in a solid phalanx towards them. Then he saw the high pennants floating above the riders, and he heard music, ever so faintly, and it sounded martial, but Balwone knew it wasn’t.

Shemmalin’s face was wreathed with smiles.

‘Praise be!’ he cried. ‘These are Antipal’s royal guard. They are coming also to meet us.’

Balwone’s heart palpitated with the wonder of the two phalanxes of beloved friends, one coming to meet the party, and the other, so to speak, protecting the rear. Balwone could not speak for the wonder he felt. His had been a battle through the years, and although often mistaken in the things he had thought and done, yet, at the centre of his being, there had always been that drive to know the Presence of the Most High, and to be his servant. He wondered whether anyone could know more joy than now he knew, and, if so, whether any person could contain such a wealth of it and still live.

His mind flew to the old mysteries he had known through the treasure of Flamgrid’s manuscripts. He put his hand into his jacket to pat the valued possession enclosed there. His fingers felt no wallet, and he searched feverishly, seeking his one beloved treasure, the wealth of wisdom.

It was gone. As the horses cantered towards their goal, towards the mounted royal guard, he knew a terrible feeling, a shock that caused his spirit to shiver.

‘What is amiss?’ Kanavah asked. ‘Your countenance has paled, and you seem distraught.’

‘Distraught enough’, admitted the prince. ‘My wallet of wisdom is missing. Mayhap it has been stolen. Certainly it is lost.’

Kanavah's eyes took on a shrewd look. 'How liberating is the loss of such a treasure', he said. He nodded towards the coming phalanx of the guard.

'What true prophetic things you may now say, oh Prince Balwone, true prophet of Lord Massia. Great, now, is your liberty.'

Balwone could not understand the words his friend was saying. As he rode his spirit was sore. It seemed some kind of darkness had closed in upon him. He was puzzled by the indifference of Kanavah. He was yet to understand the wise insight of the huge giant of Miridon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Happenings in the Kingdom of Frimpone: Balwone Meets an Old Sage and an Aged King

THEY rode through the day until it was the time of eating. The late summer sun was swinging already to the west and birds were rising in the prairie grass. Sounds of singing were ahead of them, for many of the hills people had hurried to be there at the arrival of the Cathridions. There was also singing behind them because many took their ease in travelling, but the spark that had lit their spirits in the early day had released great moods of praise and rejoicing. Around them flights of quail rose and fell as though they had lost the power of flight and perhaps had died in the very exertion of their own joy. The two silver hounds bayed their endless delight at having so many quarry, but ne'er a bird did they catch.

As they paused to eat and drink, some hills folk would pass them on their stocky little donkeys, or their hardy, small hills mounts. Some of their hounds were like wolves, black and muscled, worthy hunters and foes of the large cats of the conifer forests. These were great hours—high spirits of a revived people, and an air of holiday and festival and rejoicing—but Balwone felt the difference keenly. His own spirit was near to being bitter. It was not the fact of theft which worried him, but the loss of the precious documents. In their loss was the deprivation of many. The quotes of older scribes, priests, monks, holy men, anchorites, meditators and prophets were all but lost. Given time and

opportunity, he could write much from memory, and his recall was unusual, but it was as though he valued the very documents themselves, some written on vellum, some on ancient parchment, some even on leather. How fat had his wallet been!

He thought of Flamgrid his master, and how this scholar and scribe would be distressed—were he still to be alive—at the loss of the most precious of all things.

Unwittingly, he let his hand rest on his left side, and to his growing amazement he felt a sword. Looking down he saw it was the scabbarded gold sword of Massia. By now he had understood that perhaps none other would see the sword there. Kanavah, too, did not know of it at this very moment. He, Balwone, knew that the sword did not always spell out that some danger was nigh. It was there to reassure Balwone that there was fire in his blood, his bones and his belly, and to enable him to feel power surging through him such as had happened in holy convocation in Mantria. He wondered at this coming of the sword, when he was in such dismay at the loss of the manuscripts.

Beside him there was huge laughter from the giant of Miridon. From time to time he would let the reins fall on to the pommel of his saddle, and he would throw his arms into the air as though in ecstasy, and again—from time to time—he would go off into large guffaws of laughter. He said little and it seemed he had his own private stock of humour from which his laughter flowed.

It was this laughter that made Balwone uneasy, perplexed about himself. In this state of bafflement and confusion he saw a brilliance in the sky, a tiny pinpoint it was at first, but then growing. At the beginning, he thought that it was the prince of false light who had before appeared to him, but this light was pure, and its intensity was not harsh or glaring, but gentle and soft, and it began to flood him with the same joy that Kanavah was expressing. He wondered whether that knight was seeing what he was seeing—the expanding beauty of light—but since the man's eyes were not held in one direction—ahead and above—he assumed he alone was seeing the growing glowing. This was not to say that Kanavah was not sensing something, for he was indeed a man who consciously lived in the Presence of the

Most High. His was a faith of utter simplicity, and it sat well upon him.

In a moment Balwone knew it to be Massia, kindly and loving and gentle Massia!

He cried out, 'Massia, dear Lord Massia'.

Out of the light the voice he had heard before, and which now he loved, said to him, 'My servant Balwone, my appointed and beloved prophet. Grieve not because of the writings one has purloined. This thief is a servant of the red dragon whose hope is to hold all ancient wisdom to himself, but it is a vain thing which he desires, for such wisdom is closed off to him. For him such writings will not, and cannot be known, for they are indeed mysteries.

'To you, my servant and my friend, I have given the gift of loss. Now these ancient words shall not hold you, but my sword which is girded on you by me will be more to you than the wisdom writings. The words which you had pondered from these writings—the words that are true—have long ago been inscribed in your heart. They will be there for the hour of need, and other words shall there also be. Now you will speak my thoughts and the notions and messages that the Most High himself shall give you at the time of need, and these shall be implanted so that they fade not and neither are lost.'

Long ago Flamgrid had taught him that the Most High always speaks to his prophets in dreams and visions, and this he had come to know for himself. It little mattered that in a trice of seconds the vision was gone, vanished from sight, but what did matter was that in the same trice he was freed from the hold of the writings. He knew the presence of his Master with him and he sought no more. This was enough.

He said, across to Kanavah, 'Friend Kanavah, you have great delight and your spirit is in laughter'.

Kanavah nodded. 'It is the Spirit of laughter within me who gives me this urge to rejoice. You, Balwone, you too are now in joy, for I perceive that a sword hangs by your side, which once unsheathed will be a light of gold, and a gold of enlightenment. Thus you are loosed of your old writings and free to have your Master speak through you in the immediate and direct manner.'

Balwone's expression was one of amazement, and the former dark knight roared more loudly than ever. 'You think old Kanavah is not versed in great wisdom, but children can speak more richly than do we, and simplicity is a golden sword to many.'

'Bravo!' said Balwone in delighted astonishment, but, before he could say more, the knightly horseman spurred his horse from a steady canter to a gallop. Filled and sustained by the recent meal, the man was now urging on his two silver hounds, and they joined in with deep bayings, high yelpings and excited barkings.

On an impulse, Balwone gave chase. The travelling hills people and the Shemgridions watched in astonishment as Ballia first reared, neighed, whinnied, and exploded with snortings. In a moment every fine muscle of the white stallion was stretched in swift pursuit of Kanavah and his mount. The quails sprayed out like brown waves to both sides of the horses as suddenly they were surprised by quakings and thunderings of the soil. Above, a lark sang, and, surprisingly, it was heard in its lovely notes which dropped like silver upon the caravan of families.

The two men had become as children, and the watchers had applause in their hearts for such magnificent men and mounts. They sensed these two men could not contain the laughter exploding within them, and they thought how like children they were—each vying for success. In the end it was Ballia who outpaced Kanavah's mighty mount, but Ballia wheeled and turned at his master's command, and then trotted back to the halted steed and master, that man clapping his hands for enjoyment of the glorious ride. Each saluted the other, and then rode abreast, moving as though drawn magnetically to the city of Antipone and its king, Antipal of the Kingdom of Frimpone.

It seemed they would reach Antipone in the late afternoon, and they were making a fair distance from the hills when Shemmalin rode up to Balwone. Seeing the elder wished to speak with the prince, Kanavah dropped back to his usual position in the rear.

Shemmalin pointed along the track to what seemed to be an old temple. 'That is the home of Gerahon the old preacher of Frimpone', he said. 'He was by way of being a prophet, and had

a fiery way with him. He proclaimed Massia with great devotion and vigour, but now he is an old man—not that the fire he once knew is not smouldering within him. Many come to seek his advice, so that now he is looked upon as a sage. He would be to Frimpone that which Flamgrid has been to the faithful in the lower northern kingdoms.

'At times he seems somewhat discouraged, for his body will not let him do what once he used to do, come hail and snow, come fierce burning heat or storms and floods, for such never hindered him in the days of his vigour. In all of it he would go out to teach the tenets of the Most High, and the great love of Massia.'

Shemmalin looked directly at Balwone. 'Sire', he said, 'he would greatly desire to see you and to hear your words as a prophet, for he will be unable to travel to the holy convocation'.

'Then let us turn aside', said Balwone. 'It will be my delight to visit such a man.'

Shemmalin pointed out the fact that the temple was ancient and had once been a shrine of the pagan gods, but for centuries wise men, proclaimers and sages had lived there. In that sense it was a holy place.

When the Shemgridion elder and Balwone entered the ancient temple, they found an old man seated cross-legged on a mat. There was little furniture, and for a moment Balwone was reminded of the home of Aelfric Collenthribben, although that place had been in semidarkness, whereas this place was filled with light. The man seated there was properly dressed, his body clean and his eyes alight with life. His creased face showed his age, but he was not wizened in body, nor in the depression which takes many in their old age.

He knew Shemmalin, and in his delight would have risen, but the elder motioned him back to his position, also seating himself on the mat. When he told Gerahon that this was Balwone, the man's eyes brightened even more.

'Massia's prophet!' he cried, and his voice had a rich timbre as that of a young man. 'The Most High is gracious to me.'

Balwone bent and the old man took his hands in his own. For comfort's sake Balwone crouched, his thighs resting on his heels.

'I am but a pupil of dear Flamgrid', he said, 'and a disciple of Lord Massia'.

'Excellent! Excellent!' the old proclaimer said. 'Flamgrid I well know, and I, too, am Massia's servant.'

For further comfort Balwone sat on the mat, facing Gerahon. As the sage of Frimpone demanded, so he told the long story of his life. He watched the eyes of his new friend as they widened, and delight grew. He saw shadows in the man's eyes when he spoke of his visit to the Holy Mountain, but again the eyes glowed as he talked of subsequent events and what had led to his reaching the upper northern kingdoms.

When he had finished, he saw that the old man was trembling.

'Young man', he was saying, 'you must hurry. Have your holy convocation at Antipone, but go directly to Cathrid through Manignia, and tarry not in Manignia, for many events are happening and others are about to come to pass. Last night Massia appeared to me in a dream and told me to warn you. The kings of the lower northern kingdoms, especially those of Manignia, Zed and Flagland, are sending messages to one another. They are alarmed at your travels to the upper kingdoms, and they fear these kingdoms may advance on them, bearing the message of Massia about the Most High. They fear, too, lest their people become infected by such teaching, and the ancient gods be crowded out. Unless impeded by some miracle, they will soon set about destroying the Shemgridions within their domains. You, too, will they gladly slay'.

In his alarm, Balwone was about to rise, but he thought better of it. He stared at the old man. 'Tell me', he said, 'is Paelfric loyal to his new found faith? What of Aelfric Collenthribben; is he also remaining loyal?'

'They are loyal', said the sage simply, 'but you must hurry back to them for their encouragement'.

He paused as though debating an important matter in his mind. The brows puckered, and in the eyes was a darkness. Then the brows unpuckered, and the sage was clear-eyed.

'Prince Balwone', he said, 'there is a matter on which I would speak with you, for it has to do with the future of all kingdoms. As a reader of the saints and the sages, and as one who knows of the prophets of old, even those before Massia came, and many who lived after his exaltation, let me remind you of what happens in our history—which men call human, but which you and I call divine.'

'You must recognise that it is a marvel—this virtual peace which has remained for centuries in these upper northern kingdoms. Aye, but at what great cost in the early years. Your reading must have told you that countless numbers of Massia's followers have been slain for their faith. Their childlike trust in the One who is above all gods and lords and suchlike spirits has ever been hated, and with all the venom of the first seducing serpent and the hideous dragon who has feasted on the blood of the martyrs.'

'It was because of this many of them fled, and hid in forests, or lived for years under the great city called Babylon, some of them not seeing the light of day for years, often knowing their companions had been sought out. Those caught were first tortured and then slain, some being crucified, drawn and quartered, and others thrown to lions or forced to be gladiators in a world which was composed of men and women who were free and rich and given to pleasures, whilst their slaves lived often in poverty.'

'Say not that the great dragon and his hordes of evil powers have no existence and are but the excited imaginations of a heated mind which seeks, in this way, to explain such hatred of the Most High and Lord Massia. Many of these dark creatures have seemingly vanished from our world, but they too, in their way, have gone underground as the faith of Massia has spread. We must remember them, and know that such a time will come upon us again. Indeed, this is what is happening now. Thus we must not think of our glorious worship, our rich singing and music, our feasting in the presence of the Most High, Massia and his silent, but powerful Spirit, as a luxury, for in and by it we are being trained for terrible days ahead.'

'This, dear Balwone, I would have you know, as doubtless Massia tells you himself. The question is not, "How, then, shall

we fight this enemy?” but “Dare we not fight him with the weapons of the Most High? Dare we not go into battle under the banner and escutcheon of Lord Massia?”’.

For some reason unknown to him, Balwone’s mind had flown to Gothic, the quiet princess whom he dearly loved, but a woman denied to him by circumstances, and the hatred of Gothroyd.

‘I hear you clearly, sage of Massia’, he said. ‘I know that there is great pain in the mind of Paelfric whose kingdom may well be attacked. I know the same pain is in the heart of Clopelt and will be in the hearts of these other northern kings. They have refused to establish and maintain great armies and so will be helpless before invasions. Yet, to this time, they have kept the peace.’

‘It is because they have kept the faith’, agreed Gerahon, ‘and now they are pained in mind and heart, for they love their people and do not wish to see them perish. The great dragon is on the rampage. His jealousy of Massia is such that he would bring all kingdoms down in ruins rather than let them be in Massia’s hands.’

‘Now you must go with proper haste, Balwone the Great, the son of the Eternal. The will of the Most High must be done, no matter what blood may have to flow’.

A thought came to Balwone. Zed’s king was the father of the one woman he had truly loved, and whose love often visited him and roused wonderful desires in his heart.

‘Gothroyd?’ he asked. ‘What of him?’

‘He is the one who is stirring the other monarchs’, said Gerahon. ‘But for him things would proceed as usual in the kingdoms, but he is filled with guilt by virtue of his persecution of the Shemgridions, and the massacre of them. It is his guilt which compounds his hatred until it is a cauldron, and this shall boil over and scald the nations’.

Shemmalin had been listening in shocked silence. Now he spoke. ‘It is the will of the Most High’, he said. ‘Without the blood of the martyrs, the faith will not flourish. If it is his will, then this must be.’

Balwone shook his head in non-agreement. ‘Nay’, he said, ‘the Most High can change the course of the nations even against their wills’.

He looked at the old man, and said, ‘Bless us, old warrior of the faith. Pray for us, and we will go quickly’.

The old man’s eyes shone. With difficulty, he drew himself up until he stood upon his feet. Balwone saw, then, that he was a tall man, and one who had been of large stature. He and Shemmalin knelt down before the sage and received his blessing.

When they stood, the three men embraced. Before they left him, the old proclaimer seemed to have a new surge of life, a surge of new life.

‘He renews our life like the eagle’s’, he said. ‘He gives new vigour to the flesh and bones of an old man.’ He remembered fragments of some of the same documents that Balwone had learned by heart. ‘The young men shall utterly fail’, said the old man, ‘but the old will fly afresh as on eagle’s wings’.

Balwone remembered the three eagles that he had seen flying that morning, and the strength of their pinions came to him afresh. The old man was standing as though similar strength had flowed into him.

He said to Shemmalin, ‘Mount me on one of your horses, and I shall accompany you to Antipone’.

‘That we shall do’, said Shemmalin, visibly, deeply moved.

Gerahon was mounted behind one of the party, and they moved with some haste towards the city.

As in Mantria and their arrival at Bekrift, so here the royal guard came out to welcome and escort them to the king and the royal palace. Again it was an impressive sight—the banners waving on high poles, the armour of the guardsmen with their shining cuirasses, and the helmets with their long plumes of red and gold—so that again the two knights felt their pulses quicken, whilst the Shemgridions were simply grateful for a monarch who was a man of faith.

Once in the castle they were welcomed by King Antipal and the Queen Meranol. Gerahon had been conducted to the throne room along with the Shemgridions. The king was most gracious to the old sage of his kingdom, and bowed to him. He then

welcomed the Cathridion party and expressed his gratitude for their visit.

Balwone was watching the king who, like Clopelt, was quite aged. Meranol his queen was younger, but she, too, resembled Queen Mercia in that she was gracious, and clearly supportive of her spouse. In one way, it was as though they were back in the Bekrift castle. At the same time, Balwone noted the anxiety in the face of the king.

'If it please Your Majesty', he said, 'we would wish Gerahon the sage to speak to you of the warnings he has had in a dream or vision'.

The king turned his intensely blue eyes on the man he so revered, and he nodded permission.

Gerahon seemed stronger than he had appeared back at the temple. In quiet tones, he told the royal couple of the dream he had had.

The king nodded. 'What you have seen in a dream is what is so. Our intelligence tells us of the anger of Gothroyd, and his determination not only to stamp out the faith of the Most High in his kingdom, but to gather forces from Manignia, Cathrid, Miridon and Flagland, as well as from his own kingdom.'

There seemed to be worry in the eye-wrinkles of the aging king. 'We do not know what to do', he said. 'In past times the three upper kingdoms have been most powerful. Centuries ago we were the dread of the lands of this continent, but we have declared ourselves to be peaceful, and apart from our ceremonial guards and a few sheriffs amongst the people, we have no fighting force. Nor do we desire to raise such. Because we have been three peaceful kingdoms we have been left alone. Now this Gothroyd, out of his anger and guilt, has decided to force the ancients gods and their customs upon us.'

'What of Paelfric of Cathrid?' asked Balwone. 'What is his mind?'

'It is the mind of peace', said Antipal. 'He has sent us messages of encouragement, and says he will not invade our realm.'

He paused and looked at the prince. 'He desires you to return with all haste. He waits on your advice. Mayhap you would write some message and we could send it off to quieten his mind.'

'Quieten his mind', mused Balwone. 'How do we quieten that mind other than direct it to Massia whose Lordship is over this whole earth?' He went on, 'We shall also pray that the Most High might confound Gothroyd's knavish tricks so as to leave all kingdoms in peace. This, too, is the mind of Massia—to have peace between all kingdoms, as also tranquillity within them.'

He looked up at the king. 'This epistle I shall write immediately. I also crave the help of Your Majesty in the sending of a message to Oranone, to King Haelfric of Cautria, telling him we cannot visit, but needs must return to Cathrid, even before the Feast of the Seasons.'

'It shall be done. Write these missives and they shall be despatched with haste.'

He now addressed the whole company. 'Tomorrow will be a special day in our kingdom. You have come in the power of Massia, and we will greatly welcome your service to our people. It is a sign to me, this coming of yourselves, but no less the coming into Antipone of our beloved sage Gerahon. Massia must have a special time for us, and it will be the renewal of our kingdom. It is also most unusual to have our hills people descend to the plains at such a time as this. Praise be for all these things!'

'Praise be!' echoed the courtiers present, Balwone, Kanavah, the Shemgridions and the queen. Before the Cathrid company had retired that evening the king drew Balwone aside. For a few moments he hesitated, and then spoke.

'We are greatly encouraged by your coming amongst us, for our hearts are parched and we need the reviving of our spirits. Yet I would have words with you. We have come to know of you as a peaceful man, and you are of that ever peaceful man Flamgrid, yet you stir the minds and consciences of governors and monarchs by your faith and your way of life. These many years we have somehow maintained a peace, even with those kingdoms whose god is a great and wily serpent. Now, it seems, the hour of great conflict is upon us, and we cannot escape it.'

'Tell me, then, prophet of Massia, how must it be with us, and what are we called to do? For centuries we have sought to avoid the knavish tricks, the politics and the intrigues of the nations who know not Massia, but this evil dragon and his

consorts seek to take advantage of this simplicity of living. What, then, would you counsel us?’

‘Sire’, said Balwone with great feeling, ‘it is you who should counsel us. You and other kings have borne great pain for your people, and I dare not seek to tell you what you might do. Even so, dreams and visions come to me from the Most High, and as his prophet it is my task to tell the substance of them’.

The king nodded in agreement. Balwone, looking at him, had great pity and love for this aged and gracious king, as he had for the monarchs of Cathrid and Mantria.

When the king sighed, it was not after the manner of a lament, but a thoughtful expression of the peace which he knew in the midst of his heavy burden of state.

His eyes shone a little, and Balwone felt the warmth of the man. Impulsively, he kneeled before the monarch and waited for his commendation.

‘Peace be to you, Prince Balwone’, the aged man said. ‘We will all need to live in that these days, and you will help to bring it to us.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A Vision of a Dragon and a Lion, and the Acts of Holy Convocation

THE MEN of Cathrid were up early in the morning. As far as was possible, they packed their saddlebags for a quick leaving of the city after the completion of the holy convocation, because a swift departure was essential. The palace servants helped them to break their fast and prepare for the day.

During the night, Balwone had had one of his dreams. Whether a dream or a vision he could not say, but by it, his spirit was greatly enlarged.

This time there was a vast part of the heavens set before him. He firstly saw the great red dragon, and it seemed its body, head and limbs were stretched across the firmament. As it was spreadeagled across the vast expanse, it pulled and tore at the heavens with its cruel claws, and as it did so, stars fell to the earth, their falling causing explosions and some damage to the world and its people.

When it seemed that it had stretched so that its whole being now encompassed all points north, south, east and west, it then appeared that there was nothing in the universe but this mighty creature. Having achieved this high status, the huge beast stood and beat its breast so that it resounded with rolls of thunder that were ear-splitting in their volume and intensity. Great flashes of red flame burst from its distended nostrils, and enormous emissions of smoke rolled far and wide. This beast was not only immense in size, but so, it seemed, in power. It appeared that

nothing could contain it, and a spirit of dismay came to the mind of the watching Balwone.

It was being borne in upon him that the eight northern kingdoms—the three upper and the five lower—were now becoming the kingdoms of the red dragon since nothing opposed it, and the arrogance of the beast was such that it thumped its breast with its clawed hands, and hammered on its mighty thighs, until there was no place of silence or reprieve from the giant creature. Yet, it was at this point of seeming universal victory that another roar came to Balwone's ears, and as he heard it his whole being shook and quivered as all the boasting of the red beast had been unable to effect in him.

Then, to the left of the red dragon, there appeared a paw of immense proportion, and as it appeared, the dragon shifted somewhat further to the west. Gradually the lineaments of a lion rampant appeared, and the crimson beast seemed to shrink away from contact with it. Now the mighty head of the lion, invested with a great tawny mane, lifted itself and roared. In what seemed to be desperation, the beast sent out rolling clouds of fire and smoke, but the lion's front right paw was lifted upwards and struck at the dragon. As the lion smote with both paws, there were weals on the scaled limbs and belly of the beast, and it retreated even as it sought to strike back at the lion.

To his amazement and delight Balwone saw the size of the red beast diminish, as though the tearing of the lion's claws was deflating that dragon. As the lion advanced, not only did the size of the dragon and the volume of its roaring decrease, but the lion now became increasingly rampant, striking and smiting until the red creature was almost defeated. Then, at a certain point, the lion ceased its roaring, and like some warm and affectionate great cat, stretched himself sinuously across the heavens, and lay, head between paws, silent and merely staring with golden eyes at the retreating dragon.

At this sight of the almost domesticated great cat, the dragon turned in amazement. It began to move towards the cat, though this time in utter quietness, its mouth restraining its habitual thunders, and in this stillness, it raised scaled arms and clawed fists to strike a lethal blow. The prince of Manignia felt horror in

his belly and a fearful coldness in his heart, and he almost wept at the taming down of the lion, who now was seemingly doomed to annihilation.

Yet, not quite so. The tawny beast with its eyes of golden beauty was somehow changing, as often happens in dreams and visions, and slowly it was becoming as a lamb, white as snow, smaller than the lion, and even more simple. The lion had become a lamb, and although Balwone saw, as it were, a scarlet streak across its pure wool, yet it was vividly alive. It may have been that in one of its smittings the dragon had wounded the lion and that wound was now there, in the lamb, but it seemed unperturbed. It stood, staring up at the crimson dragon which was now bearing down upon it with a fiery snarl. The dragon stood upright, ready to strike the helpless creature into oblivion, but the soft and gentle eyes stared unblinking into the yellow balls of the dragon's eyes, and as it stared, the huge creature was transfixed with fear, frozen with an obvious dread, and unable to cope with the simple lamblike innocence.

With a horrified shriek, it shrank back, and as the lamb, still seemingly naive and innocent, bounded forward with a playful skipping action, the red beast groaned. It was now the weak one, its body all of a quiver and a shaking, and its fire and roaring bluster dissolved in the horror of the little lambkin of love. As the lamb's head turned a wound could be seen, and at the sight of this, the massive beast seemed to shrivel and diminish, and it seemed it was swooning, and even dissolving, so frail and defeated it appeared to be.

As the domination of the mighty dragon dwindled down to a confused nothing, the lamb grew in stature, and became upright, and, behold! it was a man, a mighty prince, a King of all kings and a Lord of all lords, and the name of the mighty one was Massia, prince of the Most High, and brother to all mankind.

As he lay under the spell of the dream or the visitation—which it was Balwone could not tell—the watching prophet perceived the import of the message. It was that no kingdom under the bewitchment of the red dragon could survive against the Lion of the Most High, Massia himself. Nothing could prevail against the One of the golden sword, and Balwone knew his old commission

had become vividly renewed. Gothroyd and his brood would never prevail against the Lord of the Most High.

He rose, and refreshed himself before the coming events of the day, telling his friend Kanavah of what he had seen, and that knight glowed no less than the prince of Manignia.

‘We scarce can wait until we return to Cathrid’, he said, ‘and then go to battle with those who would defy the Most High himself’.

He could not resist a last sharp word with his friend. ‘Better such a vision than a wallet of written wisdom.’

He did not, however, win the moment. Balwone said, without rancour, ‘Better both—such a vision and a wallet of wisdom writings together’.

Balwone, after breaking his fast, sought out his new friend Gerahon and told him of the vision and the meaning he had derived from it. The old man’s eyes shone. ‘Massia is indeed good’, he said, ‘to give us such forewarnings and then comfort us with them. Of a truth, we must hasten on to Cathrid after today’s holy convocation’.

Balwone looked surprised. ‘Do you intend coming with us?’ he asked.

‘Listen, my friend’, said the sage. ‘In our history—the history of our kingdoms which have come under Massia—wonderful times, such as are with us now, have happened, though not often. When they happen, it is because Massia is stirring his people into fresh action. Such action we are now in.

‘Over many years I have taught young men and women; especially the men, for they have had to leave home and travel to distant places. Sometimes a couple without children have ventured on this work. Now some of my first students are aging, yet others are young and eager. This coming of you amongst us has stirred us all. Not only will I come with you, but many of them also. Some are men of the hills, and some are of the plains. They are all men of fire, just as Massia was pleased to make me such a one.

‘As I have told you, your coming has renewed my spirit like the eagle’s. How often I would have left my house and gone off alone,

but always he called me to remain and teach the young men, that like faggots they might catch alight and do what only with difficulty I could now do.’

The old man’s eyes had a gleam in them. As Shemmalin had told Balwone, this man had a rich history of grand preaching, moving thousands deeply and making the words flower in other people’s lives. Now the man pressed Balwone to accept him as part of the new community of workers.

‘Cathrid will see what it has never seen’, said Gerahon. ‘I doubt not but that many will already have pressed through to Cathrid, and others, hearing the news that you cannot visit them, may also gather at Endomin for the events which will happen there. Prince Balwone, I must go with you.’

‘Come, dear Master’, said Balwone with affection. ‘We will be the stronger for your coming. All who are on the side of the Lamb are a great strength for us against the red dragon.’

Having said these words he left the sage and made straightway to the throne room.

Much activity had taken the royal household, the guard and citizens of Antipone. All the arrangements for holy convocation were being put into place. Whilst there was a place of common ground within the city bailey, yet the convocation was set outside the city on a flat area of prairie grass, with a small hill from which the crowd could be addressed.

Many were still arriving, and to Balwone’s delight he was introduced to some who were from Cautria, and these were both Shemgridions and other followers of Massia. Balwone was astonished at the number of musical instruments which had been brought for the meeting. He saw many elainas, plus other musical devices which he had not previously seen. String, sound and percussion instruments were in abundance, and, as at Bekrift, so here, many were tuning them. Groups of playing troubadours were also present, and their singing was in varying metiers. The women sang in high melodic voices, and their lyrics often carried more clearly than those of the men.

The music was already having its effects upon the gathering people. How joyful they looked, how eager in anticipation. The

mind of Balwone worked as he sought to visualise the difference there would be between old gatherings to do obeisance to the gods and idols, and this one where worship was being offered to the Most High. He doubted that there would have been such joy in the old manner of worship.

At the time of commencement of convocation, the royal household made its way up the hill, encouraged by the official musical band whose music was of an unearthly beauty. It was majestic, triumphant, but not a blaring symphony that dominated the spirits of a free people. Children loosed themselves from their parents and ran down happily to watch the royal cavalry and the music being played.

The two knights and Gerahon, along with the gentle Shemgridions, were in the royal party, and they were seated around the dais. Without adjuration, the whole congregation rose and sang a hymn to the Most High, Massia and the Spirit Eternal. There was so much teaching in it that Balwone wondered. Then he realised that centuries had built up this teaching and the deep understanding of old proclaimers, prophets and teachers.

After the song, the people seated themselves, and the king began his oration.

‘This is not only a time of worship’, he said, ‘but a time of listening to the voice of the Most High, especially through his servant Balwone the Great who is the prophet of the Most High.

‘This is also a time of danger. In our history, some of the kings who worshipped not the Most High have sought to press us with the sword to kneel to their gods and lords, but we have steadfastly refused so to do. Balwone will tell you of a great vision which he has been given, and I believe it has been given for us all. The Most High vouchsafes such dreams and visions to his prophets, and we have a message for you at this moment. It is enough for me to tell you that the lower northern kingdoms are planning to invade us, and are presently arming to do the same. As you know, we do not so arm, for our trust is not in the weapons of man, but in the weapons of the Most High.

‘Soon I will let Balwone speak to you, but first we must worship our Eternal One and his servant Lord Massia.’

Scarcely had he said these words than the entire crowd rose, and as one began to sing a song so glorious that Balwone and his party wept. The mighty waves of song were, as once Balwone was permitted to know, like the rushing sounds of many waters, the high tide of an ocean so huge and vast that the spirit of a man could not contain its immensity, but must needs be expanded by it beyond all he had known.

It seemed to Balwone that all his previous rich experiences were brought together, and yet were but as nothing against this glorious tide of singing and music. It was as though great powers were present with them, in their midst, heartening their hearts, lifting their spirits and helping them to see what a wonderful thing it is to be human and in communion with one another and their Most High Creator.

Balwone rode the tide of that great sea as he began to speak. He told them of dreams and visions he had had over many years, but said he set no score on such wonderful visitations. They were but the Most High’s way of talking to him as a man, and making him to be a prophet. He did not spare himself in the telling, so that they would know he was as human as were they, and that Eternal Love would take such as he, and make of him what, by nature, he never was.

He told them the story of the dragon, the lion and the lamb. He said that behind this story was another, of which this was but a visual presentation.

‘Long ago’, he said, ‘there was a Man sent by the Most High, but before he was a Man he was with the Most High; indeed that was where ever he had been. Before time there had been a Lamb and that Lamb was this Man who, on becoming true Man, was nevertheless the Lamb he had always been.

‘In envy of the Man the Holy Maker had created, a great serpent, beautiful in appearance, but subtle of mind, which had sought, for envy, to destroy the Man, since he was—as was no other—the total reflection of the Most High. The serpent in its red rage became the crimson dragon, and henceforth aspired and conspired to destroy this Man.

‘The day came when its plan to destroy this Man seemed complete and infallible. If this creature of glory could be shown to be a creature of disgusting nature, of no high stature, and mortal to the point where he would die, were he hung on a pole, were his hands and his ankles but nailed to that pole, and were he to die amongst the stinging, scoffing, scorning, spitting and hatred of his fellow creatures, then all the world would forever despise and reject him.’

The story was an ancient one that his listeners well knew, but every time it was told, their hearts would seem to break, and their minds to expand with the immensity of love. As now, some would weep, some grow cold with sorrow, others cold with terror, but all could not but listen to the golden voice of a man whose tongue was also golden, golden in the form of a powerful sword.

As the sword, so the morning, golden through and through. In the warm sun, with the sweeping prairie and the high hills behind and the mountains snow-capped to the south, this group of human beings heard the old story, greater than any of the legends of old yet being no legend itself. Even so, what the prophet was saying and telling was more of the story than they had hitherto heard.

‘It was the red dragon that day’, said Balwone, ‘lustful in the bloody death which it had sought to initiate. It thought it was its own idea to destroy the True Man and thus to destroy all human creatures.

‘How mistaken it was. In its boastfulness, it attacked that flesh that hung on the pole, seeking to make it suffer, but instead the cries that went on in the hours of suffering were really the triumphant roar of the tawny lion with the golden eyes and the paws of power. Even then, as the lion, he lifted no paw to save himself, and that was when the red dragon moved in to give its death blow to the dying messenger of the Most High.

‘This arrogant creature was powerless, for the lion was as a Lamb, and on seeing it, the deceived beast exulted and raised its claws to crush what it hated. It was here it made its terrible mistake. Its eyes were caught in the gaze of the guileless Lamb, a gaze which was quietly triumphant. Love for all the world, for all

mankind, for the hurt and wounded, the desperate and the impoverished, the hard and the bitter—that love shone through, and the sight of it sent a death shudder through the serpentine creature.

‘All its vain conceit, its merciless, ruthless cruelty, was dealt the death blow by a witless, weak and guileless Lamb. His was the warfare of love, and the sword that slew the hatred and cruelty that day was the sword of Massia. All death and dread and fear, along with anger, hatred and cruelty, received its mortal blow. This, then, was the destruction of the creature of evil. ‘Now, then, my brethren and beloved friends, that red dragon, roar as it may, cannot retake this kingdom of Massia. You will have heard of Gothroyd and his great rage; rage that has increased since he wrought the massacre of men, women and children, who dared to live harmless lives in love and humility in a forest village. This man is but the pawn of the crimson dragon who is red by drinking the blood of its victims, but doomed to die.

‘We are those whose blood it would drink. It will inspire kings and governors to destroy us from the face of the earth, but it is the Lamb who will cause us to triumph, even if it be through a martyr’s death.

‘Come, then, let us rejoice and be glad. This is the day of holy triumph, and holy love and holy joy. Whatever may be ahead of us this day will so strengthen us that we shall not falter or fail’.

For the space of half an hour no one moved. Somewhere beneath the silence there was the gentle motion of a sigh, but so slender and so deep was it that no thought was disturbed, and no spirit distracted from the quiet adoration it was giving to Massia and the Most High.

When none moved, Balwone took up his elaina and began drawing trembling fingers across it. His song was at first like the soft shirring of gentle waves, but its volume gradually increased. Sobbing words came from the prophet, and sobbing words were returned in the new, gentle singing of the multitude. It was gentleness which had to do with a Lamb, and its dulcet tones were of ineffable sweetness. It seemed there was no bitterness it could not dispel, no hurt it could not heal, and no anger it could not

mollify. None, at this point, wanted to sing songs of triumph and victory, for a greater victory was being won in the hearts of the listeners. Anguish and anger in families was healed, old feuds were dissolved, and age-old hurts knew the balm of Massia.

Then, when the minds were cleared and the hearts beat afresh with love, the multitude could not contain it. Balwone himself led in an old song he loved, but it was Kanavah who took it up into full-throated volume, and his rich baritone voice called all into unity with him, and, as all sang, tears poured from some, laughter from others, and all knew joy and peace and love.

Later Gerahon spoke to Balwone. 'What we have despaired of for generations has come to pass this day. The old faith which we steadily taught, and for which we fought in intercession, has now come to us all in a new way.

'This message we must bring to Gothroyd of Zed, the Zagon of Manignia, Clandius of Miridon and Holpen of Flagland. Only the Lamb can do that, and doubtless he is at present doing so. I must go with you, bringing with me many of my older and younger men who have waited and prayed for such a day as this one.'

Balwone nodded. 'It is a good thing you propose', he said. 'If such love could reach even the heart of Gothroyd and his fellow monarchs, then a great blow will have been struck for the liberty of many. I keep in mind, dear Gerahon, the words of our first meeting, and what you showed me of the movements of history. Our venture may bring more pain and disturbance, but peace of the heart will be its outcome, no matter how many of us may perish in the battle.'

The next morning, before the party was to move out, King Antipal came to him.

'You have brought us blessing as is proper for a true prophet to do. You have refreshed my old heart with new thoughts and understandings, and I know that my age and frailty are no excuse for not facing the battle ahead. The Most High go with you. Keep the peace, and keep the faith.'

Balwone thought his eyes were as filled with love as those of a man can be.

With an impulse born of that mutual love, the two men embraced.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A Company of Believers Makes Trek from Antipone to Endomin

IT WAS a wonderful sight and scarcely to be believed. As proposed in Bekrift of Mantria, Shemmalin and two of his Shemgridion companions were to remain in Antipone to help substantiate the fruits of holy convocation, and to be advisers to the king and his court, should they thus be required.

The wonderful sight was of the large crowd who were gathered there to send off their adventurous companions. The ongoing company was not simply of two knights and the three remaining Shemgridions, but was a contingent which had grown to such proportions that Balwone wondered whether they could travel and have food and drink enough to keep them. Some were men and women of the hills, others were of the plains, and yet others had come from the kingdoms of Frimpone and Cautria. The presence of the latter delighted Balwone, who knew they would eventually return from Cathrid with great news and encouragement for their fellow countrymen. All circumstances allowing him, Balwone still had a visit to Cautria in his heart.

It was inevitable that, at the moment of parting, all assembled should break into song. The marvel was that it was a new song they sang, one never sung before. As on other occasions, all sang together in a unity which was no less than supernal.

‘Such songs men of faith of ancient days must have sung to the Most High, for he had put such a song in their hearts’, Balwone thought, even as he was singing.

In the singing of songs after this manner, the people, whilst at one with the leading singer, nevertheless expected him to be a fraction before them in uttering the words. It would have been proper for Balwone to have thus led the singing, but to his surprise and delight it was the knight Kanavah who did so. All were caught up in the spirit of the man, who, in turn, was caught up in the Spirit of Massia.

Although it was not necessary, King Antipal sent his Royal Guard to accompany them for some hours, testing out whether some who were disloyal to Massia might seek to attack or unsettle the cavalcade of Massia’s people. As the procession was some furlongs in length, it comprised a large number of people. They were a joyful company, often singing as they walked, and with them were loaded asses and donkeys; horses whose saddlebags were filled; and water carriers who had leather containers swung over their shoulders.

The first night they stopped close to a river which was shallow enough for all to pass to the other side and shelter in the leeward side of the forest. Obviously they all delighted in the adventure of gathering light and heavy timber for the fires, in the setting up of their cooking utensils and unfolding sleeping materials. It had been suggested that they settle early to sleep for they would need to rise at first light. Even so, the singing went on until elders skirted the camps, settling them from their singing, and bidding them a night of peace.

Kanavah insisted on taking first watch with some of the men. Balwone, and the now senior Shemgridion Shemmsha, offered to take the fourth watch, the one which lasted to dawn.

Balwone had no visions or dreams to trouble him, but it was a voice within him, the voice of his conscience, which gave him some uneasy hours. Certain accusations troubled him. He knew well enough that every human being has made mistakes and sinned enough to be the target for accusations. For him these were, ‘Had he not been a deeply proud man under the guise of his seeking to bring the world to love? Had he not been the cause of the massacre of the Shemgridions? Had he not been a deluded person in his various ventures, and did they not stem mainly from his pride and ambition, much as he had disguised them?’.

He fought on, trying to reply in a rational fashion, but he remembered that he had argued thus with the dragon, with giants and one who purported to be a most beautiful woman. Never had he won an argument, but such arguments had left him weak and helpless. Now he refused to argue any more. The accusations died away, and shortly afterwards he went to sleep. Somehow the sword had spoken its own words, and he was absolved from lingering guilt.

Shemmsha had to shake him to awaken him. Rarely had this happened to Balwone, who was ever alert to the time of keeping watch. Somehow his sleep had been deep and peaceful. He was greatly refreshed. As he rose, his hand hit something of a bulky nature. It was a wallet, as the prince soon discovered as he took the object to the edge of a fire. By the time he reached the light of the flames, he was sure it was his wallet. His excited feeling was justified. It was the wallet Flamgrid had given him. He searched through to see whether some writings had been taken, but it seemed none was missing.

Shemmsha was watching with some satisfaction. Balwone scarcely looked up, and then he withdrew a slip of parchment, and by the light of the fire read it with pleasure.

Shemmsha told him that Kanavah had discovered the leather package lying away from any group, and it had either been dropped unwittingly, or someone was returning it, perhaps without even knowing that it had belonged to Balwone.

Half crouched, the delighted knight was peering at the slip of parchment in his hands.

'Friend Shemmsha', he said, 'listen to this. He who wrote it was one of the ancients. Now hear how he loved the Most High!'

*With Thy calling and shouting my deafness was broken;
With Thy glittering and shining my blindness was put to flight.
At the scent of Thee I drew in my breath, and I pant for Thee.
I have tasted, and I hunger and thirst;
Thou hast touched me, and I am on fire for thy Peace.*

As Shemmsha nodded his head in agreement with the unknown writer, Balwone rose and they proceeded to their watch —Shemmsha on the eastern side and Balwone on the western.

From time to time, they would walk and meet, and for some moments they would exchange thoughts that had come to them on their rounds.

Shemmsha said, 'To think, Lord Balwone, that out of this strange collection of human beings will come those who will take the love of Massia to kingdoms we have never even seen!'

'Ah, yes', said Balwone, 'and would that we be among them, Shemmsha. How familiar we become with those who have known him, but how our heart is almost wrenched with joy when we meet one who has never known him, but suddenly finds the delights of his gifts, and has the certainty that he will never die.'

'Is there not a death, then?' asked the Shemgridion. 'How do you say we will never die?'

'Those are Massia's words, spoken from himself. Of course we will have what we call a death, but then we will never even see that. Others will and will be sure of our mortality. For our part we will never see death, since we will go not into it, but into life.'

'This is a thing too wonderful', Shemmsha said. 'I have never seen it in this fashion, hitherto. Now I shall never dread death.' An old song which fitted the prince's words came to him and he hummed it softly.

Both looked up at the sky. The myriads of stars gave forth the soft light that is theirs when the moon shines not. The hour of the moon had finished, and it was but two hours to the full dawn. Here and there they heard sounds of children whimpering in sleep, and comforting mutterings of parents. From time to time a sleeper would awake to fulfil a call of nature, and then stumble back to sleep. From the forest came night calls of birds, and occasionally a large one would pass over their heads. Near the dawn a blackbird began his love call to his mate, and the answer was as long and sweet, every note being repeated, all being fugal.

With the dawn there was great action, the fires being stoked again, the smell of food floating through the camp, and early troubadours who could not let their music lie silent were

strumming on strings, blowing wood until the soft notes came, whilst children roamed with percussion instruments. Voices were many and loud. Finally the fast was broken, sleeping luggage was packed, the animals were loaded and the long procession was again on the move.

Passing by the tall mountains presented some difficulties. Whilst the last spur ended at a point where the kingdoms of Frimpone and Manignia met, the company had to pass over low hills which were rock strewn and rough to traverse. Even so, the country was not impassible. Trees which grew tall in the mountain forest were here low and stunted, but, as a kind of compensation, flowers were more in number and variety. The travellers made their way across the country until they saw again the rolling prairies, green with tasselled grasses, and these flowed like an ocean when the wind passed through them. The sight was delectable, and the children abandoned themselves to the long grass, opening their arms to it, laughing and running and jumping and moving low through it as though swimming in a vast sea.

Later they found and moved down the old road towards Cathrid. They had to pass through Manignia, and some feared they would be denied use of the wide path which led to Endomin. It was for many the first encounter with a kingdom which was not the declared domain of Massia. Balwone stayed well in front of the cavalcade, and when a posse of King Zagon's men appeared, it was the prince they met.

He was greeted warmly, for he was of royal blood, and of his own choice had not received the kingship. Magnion, the royal city, was far to the north-east, and his own castle home, *Zagonholme*, was yet further in the same direction. It was clear that the company of men, women and children offered no threat to Manignia. All kings were called 'Zagon', and Balwone had quietly evaded the suggested offers of marriage to Megafriith, the eldest daughter, buxom and of a generous spirit, but who drew forth no desire from Balwone. For her part she was content enough. Balwone was acceptable enough to the royal family for he was not a man for politics, but they thought him somewhat eccentric, and certainly a man of high and impossible ideals.

With a slight pang of heart, the prince recognised some of the royal guard, and responded with delight to their greetings. He explained the reason for the long procession, and they wished him well. One of the knights, a man named Dimion, took him aside from the others of the posse and spoke with him.

'Strange things are happening in our kingdoms', he said. 'All are matters political, and the unrest stems from Gothroyd of Zed. He seems to be ambitious enough to lead an army composed of those of us of the five kingdoms, but many do not trust him.' Dimion smiled faintly, 'You may remember that many years ago our own Zagon dealt cruel treatment to Zed and Cathrid, and it was your Flamgrid who gave them astute advice which virtually saved their kingdoms. Now Gothroyd wishes to exterminate the royal leaders of the far north and impose on them the ancient worship. This is far from King Paelfric's desires, and I doubt the other kingdoms will trust Gothroyd enough to be allied with him.'

'I think this monarch is in the throes and pangs of guilt', said Balwone. 'His ruthless and senseless killing of the harmless Shemgridions must be torturing his conscience, and he is working his guilt out on others.'

'Yet they say that to turn from the ancient gods is to turn from our whole way of life', the other knight observed.

'Do you really believe that?' asked Balwone. 'How many in our kingdoms love or fear those powers? Many, if not most, no longer believe in them. Only the superstitious and those who love mysterious forms of worship really follow the ancient gods.'

'It is the simple ones', agreed Dimion, 'yet all sow their crops by the days of the gods, and even the names of our days of the week derive from them. It will not be a simple matter to change the old for the new'.

Balwone smiled. 'It is a fact that the new is older than the old. All gods must ultimately answer to the Most High. Even the red dragon is a creature, strange and weird though it may be. None is a god in himself or herself but the Eternal, the Most High.'

Knight Dimion looked up at the sun. He was thinking of the time that was passing.

'We must be away, and you also will be wanting to get to Endomin before the sun ascends too high. Good fortune, Prince

Balwone. I will share our conversation with King Zagon and doubtless he will share it with Queen Mabila, for women count much in the outcome of the plans kings and governors make.'

'Massia go with you', said Balwone warmly. 'One day I shall return to the court, but that may yet be years away.'

The whole posse of the guard saluted regimentally, wheeled their horses and moved back towards Magnion. Balwone had fleeting thoughts of the home he loved—*Zagonholme*—but his mind was too occupied with the events which lay ahead, and he cantered Ballia forward until man and horse had regained the lead.

With a certain amount of urging, the party could have reached Endomin by nightfall, but Balwone, albeit reluctantly, called a halt for the sake of the children. They were about to leave the prairie and enter the royal forest, so they remained on its edge and took advantage of being leeward of the night winds.

That night, Balwone and Shemmsha took the first watch. Knowing they were in the realm of a people who still worshipped the ancient gods, they wondered what mischief might come to their wards, the people of three upper northern kingdoms, but for no accountable reason there were no disturbances.

Early in the morning, they set out on the last leg of their journey. The travelling was uneventful, and they reached Endomin before noon.

As they neared the city, they began their singing, and it was a cheerful procession which walked across the drawbridge and through the portcullis into the city bailey and marched forward until they reached the common. It was Shemmsha who led the people, whilst Balwone and Kanavah moved to the second bailey, that of the royal castle, and there on the bridge was Roget, and, standing beside, but barely recognisable because of his improved health, was Aelfric Collenthribben.

Not a great deal of intelligence had reached the castle so that Roget stared at the huge knight who stood before him and Aelfric. With a barely concealed smile Balwone introduced the knight as Knight Kanavah of Miridon.

At first Roget was unbelieving, and even suspicious. He stood back and looked the knight up and down. With a puzzled look he asked Balwone, 'Is this not the man who sought to destroy thee in Miridon? Is this not the dark knight?'

Balwone laughed heartily and the suspense was relieved. 'It is indeed he who was the dark knight', he said, 'but now he is a knight of light, and light knight though heavy he be, is one beloved by the Most High and by Massia who is his Lord'.

It took some moments for the good news to penetrate the brain of the squire, but, when it did, he shouted in delight, went forward and wrung the hands of their old enemy.

'If the Most High can change old Roget, then also he can change Knight Kanavah.' He seemed to be unable to contain his joy.

He came forward and knelt before Balwone. 'Good master, we have missed thee these many days, and Massia be praised that thou art returned, alive and well, and ready for the devilish things of which we are hearing in these days.'

Aelfric Collenthribben came forward, and bowed before Balwone. 'I also welcome you, master', he said. 'To you I owe my life, and with all I am grateful to the Most High.'

Kanavah had heard of the change of the priest of the gods, Aelfric, and yet he could not believe what he was hearing. Like Roget, he felt his own self to be the worst of all men, and so he should easily have believed in the transformation of the sage of the ancient gods. He saw the light in the eyes of this man who had once been like a dervish and a devil, and a huge feeling of delight and gratitude swept over him.

He gripped the man in a bear hug and said, 'Now we shall attend to these kingdoms who are in darkness, and we shall all be light to them, light they can never withstand'.

Aelfric was certainly a person of light, and his joy in the presence of the other three men certified that.

'The days grow darker, Master Balwone', he said, 'and we will need the grace of Massia to change them, to enlighten us all'.

At that point a courtier came forward and bowed to Balwone. 'The king calls for your presence, Prince Balwone', he said. 'He would have you come immediately to the throne room.'

‘Let me also bring my friend Knight Kanavah’, said Balwone, and the courtier nodded.

‘As you wish, sire, but His Majesty requests there be no delay’.

Balwone and Kanavah ascended with their courtier guide, and shortly were within the simple throne room of King Paelfric and Queen Paelmin.

Both rose at the entrance of Balwone and Kanavah. Their greetings, though regal, were warm.

Balwone introduced Kanavah and told something of the story of the huge knight. The king and queen were not unaware of the identity of the man from Miridon. They were obviously delighted at this man’s conversion to the truth of Massia. All that was said confirmed the marvellous acts Massia could execute, and, of course, much in their mind was the change in Aelfric, once a bitter enemy of the Most High.

By this time all were seated, and King Paelfric said to Balwone, ‘Prince Balwone, now you must tell us more of your travels, and the things which have happened. When you have finished your narrative I also have strange news for you, some of it quite sad and even frightening. There is also news which you will receive with joy’.

Balwone began his account of his travels and the events thereof. He knew it would take time, but he also felt it essential that the king and queen should know what was happening in the upper northern kingdoms. Here and there Kanavah punctuated the account with warm interruptions, especially when Balwone omitted an incident which he thought to be important.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Tragic News Comes to Cathrid, But Good News to Prince Balwone

WHEN Balwone had finished his account, there was silence for some minutes.

Then the king spoke. ‘Now I understand that great conflicts are happening in the heavenlies. Gods and lords and other spirits are sensing they may lose these five kingdoms of this part of the north. Hence their attacks on you, and the battles you have had in your spirit.’

He looked towards Kanavah, ‘We are grateful, knight of Miridon, that you have found peace in Massia, and are with us in the battle that is impending. What think you of Miridon, and of the mind of its king and nobles? Will they be for us or against us?’

‘In full truth I cannot say’, said the knight, ‘but my heart tells me that Clandius our king, and Wonan our queen are for peace. They know that Balwone has sworn he will not use weapons against any person or kingdom, for long ago he made a pact with Princess Gothlic of Zed that he would henceforth be a man of peace. We have never had to fear attacks from the north because of the hitherto impregnable Allein, and Zed has never engaged us from the east, though I am told that Gothroyd says he seeks revenge against Manignia for the defeat of his land many years ago’.

The king received this news in thoughtful silence. Moments later he addressed himself to Balwone.

‘This vast gathering of folk from the upper kingdoms’, he asked, ‘what is its intention? Why so many women and children? Why does none bear arms?’.

‘They are men and women of peace, sire’, said the prince. ‘As I have just told you, they are the servants of Massia and would bear arms only for him, but not what we call arms. They march only under Massia’s banner, the banner of love. They use but one sword, the golden sword of Massia against which none is powerful, and they are equipped only with the holy armour of the Most High. In their joy they have come to share in the great hour which will be to all at the time of the Festival of the Seasons. For this reason, we hurried back without going on to Cautria to talk with King Haelfric.’

‘This coming of theirs is commendable’, said the king, ‘but it is fraught with great danger. Here, in the crowded parts of our city, there are many worshippers of the old gods. Aelfric will quickly give you advice on that. Some, even of my court, are urging them to action. Out in the country places, lords and serfs are combining to protect and preserve the old gods’.

At this, Kanavah could not hold himself in decorum. ‘Puny gods, Your Majesty, are they who need yeomen and serfs to protect them against a people without weapons!’

The king smiled. ‘Even so, Knight Kanavah’, he said, ‘but it is insurrection they plan. They think we have Aelfric Collenthribben as a prisoner, and they believe we are attacking their gods. Since they know no other, they feel their livings and lands are at stake’.

Queen Paelmin leaned forward. ‘Some who are in this palace lie to the people, telling them Aelfric is harshly treated.’

The king nodded, accepting the interruption. ‘Certain good work has been done by your squire Roget. He has been out and amongst the people sharing what has happened in his own life. He has taken with him the gentle Shemgridions, and they are dressed in common garb. He has told them that the news of Aelfric is a lie and that the priest has become Massia’s man.

‘Everywhere there is confusion, and the coming of your many friends will make some think we have a dangerous enemy in our midst.’

‘Surely’, said Balwone, ‘they will see the truth come the day of Festival. There Aelfric can speak to them, and friend Kanavah, and all the visitors’.

For a long moment, the eyes of the king were on Balwone. His eyes, whose blue was like the sky when the sun shines on it, were mild and without fear.

‘Prince Balwone’, he said, ‘I have this news for you that King Gothroyd is even now preparing for war. He has recruited an army such as has not been known in many a long year in these five kingdoms. He has said he will march on Manignia, and he gives out his reason as retribution for that kingdom’s attack on his country those many years ago. He seeks to enlist Miridon and Flagland, and has demanded that we also join him.

‘Our intelligence sources tell us that Manignia is not his prime target. It is us he would decimate. He has received information that we would not join his forces because of his attacks on the Shemgridions, and this he counts to be disloyalty to the old gods. If we refuse to cooperate, he will strike us down. He had heard that those nations who are Massia’s servants do not take up arms, and I am told that his laughter is fierce and cruel. Having decimated us, he will then attack the upper northern kingdoms, Mantria, Frimpone and Cautria’.

Balwone rose from his chair. ‘Your Majesty’, he said with great force, ‘we must trust that he will not arrive here before the day of the Festival of the Seasons’.

The king motioned the prince to be seated. ‘The queen, Prince Zenli and I have conferred, for whilst most of our courtiers are loyal, there are a few who are not. For this reason we dare not order a Council of the Lords. We have decided, then, to call a convocation of the whole kingdom. Even now, messengers are at the perimeters of our land, calling the people to this great concourse.

‘We have seen that if people are called for the Festival of the Seasons at its appropriate time, then Gothroyd will be here before it. Certainly, he will have news of that day, and what better time to arrive and create great confusion and cause many to be slain. No: the day after the morrow will be the day of con-convocation, and we shall meet at noon. By that time most will be

present, and we will tell our people of Gothroyd's intention. His opposition alone should unite us all, whether people of the gods or of Massia. We will also let Aelfric speak of the change in his loyalty and worship, and this will surely liberate many who have depended on him as the champion of the old religion and culture. Doubtless, friend Roget and our honoured guest Knight Kanavah will tell of their change of heart. All this should have great power. Wise counsel is that, if we were to use the day of the Festival of the Seasons, then it would appear to be a direct attack on the old gods, and this we do not seek to do. We wish to go beyond those gods to the Most High him-self.

'We are, of course, counting on you, Prince Balwone. Your recital of the events of your life and of your recent visiting of the two kingdoms will bring many to see Massia is no weak lord amongst all other lords. Your words and witness will make you appear stronger and more wise than the old Aelfric, and I wager that when they see how changed that man is, they will warm to Massia and his love. Even now, we are hearing of some who have. With the great worship and singing, doubtless many will be deeply moved.'

Balwone looked thunderstruck. His mind hearkened back to the news of the warlike Gothroyd. 'What a fool I have been', he said, 'not counting on the terrible anger of Gothroyd. Now I see we must use the time speedily to counter his moves'.

He looked at Paelfric. 'I told you I met Princess Gothlic, and also Flamgrid with her, and our conversation was most heartening. She talks much to him these days, but he is an old man and very weak.'

Paelfric held up a hand, and Balwone ceased speaking.

'Compose yourself, my friend', said the king, 'for I have bad news for you.'

Balwone saw the king's face was suffused with sorrow, and with it, also, some anger. His heart began to beat faster. The one in his mind was Gothlic, who years before had helped to seal him as a man of peace after he had so soundly defeated Kanavah. At that time she had presented him with the prize of the jousting tournament—a pair of silver spurs.

It was then his heart had been finally captured. She had told him that since he was henceforth a man of peace she would give him her own award, and she pulled her soft kid gloves from her royal hands, much to his astonishment. He also remembered their discussion following the massacre of the Shemgridions. It was then he had known her to be a woman of peace, one who perhaps knew Massia, that priceless prince of all peace.

It seemed long, long moments had passed before the words of the king reached his ears.

'Your old and dear friend Flamgrid has been killed. In a rage Gothroyd had him beheaded and his head is set at the entrance into Gothric.'

The blood fled from Balwone's face. His head remained stiff and he was immobile. It took some minutes before the news was comprehended.

He wanted to cry out, 'No! No! This cannot be! Who could kill such a one as the beloved Flamgrid?', but no word came out of his mouth. He stared in part belief, part unbelief at the king.

Then he said, 'Yes! That is what that slayer of men, women and children would do. He is black of heart and cruel of spirit, and his evil has now shown itself to the world!'

A thousand memories rushed into his mind, and as though living that thousand of them, he saw a flow of pictures from the past. The end of it was the last time he had seen the sage, cared for by Gothlic who had heard that he, Balwone, was to pass through Zed that day.

Suddenly the association of Gothlic with Flamgrid stirred him.

He cried out to the king, 'And what of Gothlic? What of her? Does she know this dreadful thing has happened? Does she know of the perfidy of her father?'

There was silence in the throne room. All eyes were on Balwone with pity. He looked back at them wildly.

'No!' he cried. 'He has not harmed her also, has he? He dare not. Tell me, all you who are staring at me. Has this fiend hurt her, his own daughter?'

Now his heart was beating more wildly than ever. He was remembering his first sight of her at the tournament, and his feelings for her as she presented the gloves, his other view of

her as distant from him as a somewhat haughty princess, and in particular the time when she had accompanied her father Gothroyd on the occasion when he had slaughtered the innocent men, women and children. How he had watched her seeming to hold her father back from that, and yet afterwards appearing to have condoned what he did, until she had opened her heart and mind to him as they sat together the next day. It was then he knew he loved her whatever might come, but becoming betrothed to her seemed an impossibility by reason of his service to Massia.

No one had answered his cry and he concluded with great misery in his heart that something of a dreadful nature had happened. Surely Gothroyd, with the great affection he had for his daughter, would not have done her harm.

Queen Paelmin arose quietly, and went to the great doors of the palace room. A servant opened them and the queen went through, but the doors were not closed behind her.

Balwone sat in misery, his head between his hands. His imagination so worked in his mind that he saw the staring eyes of his old mentor and spiritual father, Flamgrid, and he wished that somehow he could have stormed Zed and brought the old sage to freedom, but he knew in the depths of his heart that he could not have achieved that, and that the cobbler's death would have had to be after this wise. His thoughts ran on to Gothic, and in his mind's eye he saw her, blue-eyed, golden-haired, beautiful in every way, but not merely beautiful as sometimes beauty is for beauty's sake, for she was not a woman obsessed with her own loveliness. She had been a deep and thoughtful woman—the one he had known.

He remembered her strange words to her father as that king had asked her whether he should destroy the Shemgridions or not. Had she said 'Not!' then, it would have made no difference, and she and Balwone had known that. Gothroyd had been bent on the destruction of the harmless Shemgridions.

Her words to her father were, 'I dare not say, for I do not know these people. This Balwone I 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'.

In those moments the truth of her prophecy flooded Balwone. Gothroyd had not, in fact, destroyed the spirits of other Shemgridions, nor lessened their courage. Even now, as he pondered that past, on this common of Endomin thousands were gathering in anticipation of a holy convocation. As he thought of this his spirit calmed.

He had heard no noise, had not realised the queen had returned. When he looked up he saw a woman in a silken gown of royal blue, whose eyes matched the colour of her garment and whose flowing hair matched the sun in its splendour. He thought it must have been a vision vouchsafed to him by Massia or the Most High, for here was a woman who matched Gothic in beauty, beauty which he had never thought another woman could possess. Her eyes had the same depth and intelligence as the woman he had worshipped over many years.

Then the truth broke through. It was Gothic! He stood, first shivering, then quivering, and then flooded with such delight as he thought no man could know.

'It is thee, Gothic', he said, slipping into the intimate language used by lovers of his day.

When she stood silent, not denying his words, he took some steps towards her. She did not move, and he knew, beyond all doubt, that this was, indeed, Gothic. Whatever human love he had prized in past days, he knew it was now a love that could flow from none but the Most High, and he knew, in his heart, that Flamgrid had done his work both in life and death, and that she, too, knew the love of the Most High and Lord Massia.

She smiled at him, and a thousand songs welled up in his heart, and he would sing every one of those to her. Instead, he kneeled at the hem of her silken garment, and took her proffered hands and pressed them to his lips.

The throne room with its great history of the past, of other kings and queens, princes and princesses, all quiet in their frames, looked down regally upon this royal pair. It was as though their silence was in homage to the two.

‘Rise, Balwone’, she said in a whisper. ‘I have come to thee and nought shall sever me from thee or thee from me.’

He knew that in palaces and at such times as these, royalty did not bare its heart to others, and that embracing and kissing were not for such public occasions, so he took her hand fully and led her to a chair beside his own. Queen Paelmin nodded gently, royally as does a matron caring for her charge but yet trusting Balwone with her.

They sat, gazing at one another, with wonder and tenderness. The hours could have passed in this fashion had not the king spoken. When he did his voice was gentle.

‘Gothlic has come to us with news of Flamgrid’s death. She has come with intelligence of King Gothroyd’s movements. She has seen that her angry father will stop at nothing to destroy all who believe in the Most High, even if that means he must destroy kings, governors and nobles, as well as these peace-loving Shemgridions.’

Balwone looked at her tenderly. ‘How has thou come? Who brought thee, and what is news of thy father and thee?’

She said in a low voice. ‘Menservants and maidservants escorted me here, my father not knowing. Thou wert ever a man of peace, and I am a woman of the same. The massacre of the Shemgridions has never left my mind, nor have I ceased to think of thee, day and night.

‘I almost pleaded of thee to take me with thyself to Miridon and the other kingdoms, but it needed the slaying of our beloved Flamgrid to move me to leave my father, for ever.’

She looked up at Balwone, and repeated the last words, ‘For ever’.

King Paelfric leaned forward and spoke, ‘It is best that you speak of these things together later in this evening. For now we must speak of the coming of the people for convocation’. He smiled wearily. ‘As yet we cannot say “holy” convocation, but doubtless that will come to pass.

‘For the present, therefore, let others withdraw, Balwone, and you and I and Knight Kanavah will speak of the things we must do before the coming of Gothroyd.’

Balwone stood and accompanied the queen and Gothlic to the great doors. They passed through and the servants closed the doors, this time on themselves also, and the three men were left to confer together.

They pondered the problems of an army coming upon a convocation, all people being gathered and the army of Cathrid at the alert.

‘Such a time would present Gothroyd with an opportunity to slaughter the multitude, seeing they could not, or would not defend themselves’, said Paelfric.

The meaty hands of Kanavah clenched and unclenched. ‘I am not as Balwone’, he said. ‘Whilst I will not joust again, nor kill one man from pride and anger, I believe our slaying of Gothroyd’s army would be just, and a holy and righteous act before the Most High.’

Paelfric looked from Kanavah’s face to Balwone’s.

‘You, Balwone’, he said, ‘what would you do?’.

‘My humanity in its flesh agrees with Kanavah, but my humanity that is in and with Massia says, “No!”. The ancients forbade us destroy one another, and time was when those of Massia would lift no finger against another human being. I believe we should seek to win this kingdom from the bondage of the red dragon and his lackeys, and I believe we will do it by a miracle if we just stand still and do not retaliate.’

‘Stand still, even if Gothroyd would mow us down with arrow, lance, broadsword, spear, dirk and javelin?’ asked the king.

Prince Balwone nodded. ‘Even if he were to do that’, he said.

Kanavah leaned his great bulk forward. ‘And if Princess Gothlic were to the fore, and he came against her, would you allow that?’ he asked. ‘Would you allow her to be murdered?’

King Paelfric searched the countenance of the prince with some earnestness. Balwone’s face was white and tensed and his hands, too, clenched and unclenched. White beads of perspiration were on his forehead.

‘So soon having her, so soon losing her’, he murmured. ‘That were cruel indeed.’

‘Then what do you say?’ asked Paelfric.

Balwone stood his full height. ‘I say’, he said, ‘that we leave the coming of Gothroyd to the Most High and to his Lord Massia, and that we first hold convocation, and let the will of the Most High be done without let or hindrance’.

‘This is how it shall be, Prince Balwone’, the King said. ‘As yet I am not sure we should not go against Gothroyd with our army. I am not yet a king of peace as are those of other kingdoms, but we shall see when the time comes.’

The three stood for some moments, pondering the matter. Then, at a signal from Paelfric, they moved to the great doors of the throne room and passed through.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

There Are Conversations of an Important Nature Concerning Gothroyd the Terrible and His Coming Conflict with Cathrid

A MAID-IN-WAITING to the queen led Balwone to the royal withdrawing room, where Gothlic and her own maid-in-waiting were present. The queen arose, smiled on Balwone, and, motioning to the maids-in-waiting to withdraw, left the young couple on their own.

For a moment the two stood timidly, as though not knowing what to do, but then on an impulse they came together in an embrace. They clung and then partly separated, murmuring things that young couples have ever done, and will ever do. Finally they sat together on a finely embroidered couch.

Balwone urged Gothlic to tell her story first, indicating that later he would tell of his adventures in the upper kingdoms of the north.

She began with the anger of the king at her meeting with Balwone.

‘He hates you, even whilst admiring you’, she said. ‘He would gladly have had us wed, even if to a prince of Manignia, for in truth he has never forgotten the humiliation Zed suffered in years gone by at the hands of the Zagon. He had not forgotten your clash with Kanavah and your defeat of him, but he is wedded to the past, and there is fire in his loyalty to the old gods and lords.’

He really thinks Zed would become a weak nation and a powerless people, and he looks upon Shemgridions as secret agents of the Most High. Massia he despises as never having been a warrior or a hunter, but only an itinerant preacher who came into this world to reduce it to weakness.

‘Whilst he had high regard for Flamgrid as a man, he blamed him for having captured fine warriors such as yourself. He is determined to stamp out weakness in his own kingdom and the other four northern kingdoms. Once he has done that, he intends to rule them and then to start a powerful crusade against the upper northern kingdoms.

‘He may admire you, but he also hates you as a champion for the peace of the world. He is cynical about human beings ever coming to a peaceful state, and fears that strong and cunning kings, governors and lords will eventually capture all kingdoms for themselves because they will prey on the weak kingdoms of Massia. For his part, he may capture such kingdoms, but then he will make them strong in the old blood religions, and by means of the gods of war and power and fertility, but he does not see that, as of old, they will be cruel and domineering as he is—and yet believes he is not.

‘So, then, he thinks he is a righteous person, fighting to keep the old traditions of the only world he knows, thinking that it is how the world ought to be.’

When Gothlic paused to take breath, Balwone smiled. ‘How wrong he is in thinking Massia is not a warrior. He is warrior without doubt, and none can defeat him by reason of his golden sword. Already he has smitten many nations throughout the world, including this Cathrid in which we are now staying. He will complete his purpose and Gothroyd your father will not be able to withstand him. He has an hour and a time for every nation, and this is Cathrid’s appointed hour for deliverance and victory.’

Gothlic remained silent, thinking on these things.

‘They are lofty ideas for me, Balwone’, she said. ‘I am but a learner. I know my father does not believe victory can ever be obtained by any other means than physical force, and he is determined to take the kingdoms if they dare to espouse Massia.’

Her hands were twisting, and he noticed that tears had come into her eyes and a faltering into her voice.

‘How angry he is’, she said. ‘One day he tried to argue with Flamgrid and show him that his was a system of weakness. When Flamgrid spoke so calmly to him and shared some of his ancient wisdom, my father slapped him across the face in rage. Once having slapped him he could not contain himself and continued to do so as though he were possessed by a demon. When I tried to calm him, his eyes went red with rage. I was frightened of what he might do, but he calmed down. Later he warned me against ever reporting such an action in the presence of others. Flamgrid he sent back to the cell, where my father rarely incarcerated him, and I know nought of the treatment the old man received there.

‘I suppose I had seen my father differently from the time of the massacre in the forest. I had always admired him as a strong man, but now I cannot see true strength in such an act. What he did to Flamgrid made me see that underneath he was not a strong man, only an angry and domineering one.’

She turned on the couch to look Balwone in the eyes. ‘At first I thought I must forgive him for what he had done to the Shemgridions, but then I realised forgiving was not my rightful act. Only he who has done harm to another needs forgiveness by that other. I know the Shemgridions did not hate him as they died, nor, for that matter, did they fear him. Doubtless they forgave, but they were of such gentleness that they would not have thought of the necessity to forgive.

‘I realised that I had to forgive my father for what he had done to me, though he thought he had done no harm. His cruelty appalled me, and I was deeply ashamed of him. Then I had a vision one day of Massia, whom, to that time, I had not really known. Somehow he was so gentle, and yet so strong, that I trembled and then wept. He comforted me and told me the day of joy would come; meantime he led me to see that forgiveness is the most powerful experience the human heart can know.

‘From then onwards, I could live with my father, even though I was often distressed by his manner. I think some news of you came through and he went about the palace like a raving idiot,

screaming, clashing his hands, throwing his arms into the air and shouting imprecations against you.

'It was about that time he thought of Flamgrid, and he had sessions with him; sessions of anger that would finish with him wanting to rush upon the cobbler, as though he would destroy him with his own hands. Then came the day when he took me aside and said that if I succumbed to your dreadful heresy he would punish me.

'My calmness enraged him, and it was shortly after that he had Flamgrid beheaded and had his head raised on a pike for all to see who entered Gothric. That was when I decided to leave him. I understood his anger and his cruelty, but I could no longer abide it.'

She had been staring ahead whilst recounting the story but now she turned to Balwone again, and laid her hands on his cheeks. 'I think I have always loved you, but the thought that you might return and he would destroy you was beyond my acceptance. So I planned with two of my maids and two of the servants to escape to Cathrid where I knew I would be welcomed.'

Her hands remained on his face, and he took them, bowed his head and kissed them passionately. They stood and embraced, and his heart throbbed with delight. His whole being was warmed.

After a time they sat again, breathing hard, and unable to take their eyes off each other.

'I am glad you have come to Cathrid. Doubtless your father will say we kidnapped you, and will use the occasion to vent his anger and spite on this nation. He may, however, rue the day when his cruelty drove you from his home. Tell me, then, what was the mind of the queen in all this?'

'It was she who suggested I leave the palace for she feared for my life. If ever he knows this is what she has done, he will punish her also.'

'It is strange', Balwone said, 'for he seemed to love her so deeply, and you he loved and admired, so proud he was of you'.

They talked on about many things, and agreed there should be no wedding until this present situation came to its conclusion.

Having dealt with such practical matters, they now occupied themselves with delight in one another until Queen Paelmin came and separated them with a few motherly words.

Later it was Roget who came to him to report what had happened in the prince's absence, and his words were good. Balwone noticed that Roget had slipped somewhat from his old use of 'thee', 'thy' and 'thou' into the new 'you' and 'your', but, when it came to tender allusions, the old words would always prevail.

'Who was old Roget the murderer', he said, 'to tell these gentle Shemgridions their business? They have kept the faith these many centuries whilst we have worshipped in ignorance what we took to be holy and righteous. When you compare the old gods we worshipped with the Eternal One they have worshipped so long, who was I to teach them? I was as a new squire, wet behind the ears, telling a seasoned knight his business. Yet I believed it was time for them to be as others around us, and not be distinguished by special garb, and by a shyness in speaking as other men speak.'

Balwone, having noted the change in Roget's own language, much of which was the usage of Shemgridion ideas and terms, grinned, as it were, a secret grin.

'Then what, Roget, has happened with these people?'

Roget puffed out a little. 'Ah, sire, they now talk to people in the market place, in the public square and in the back streets where Aelfric lived and was wounded. I would venture out with them, and Morna was my companion, and many an admirer had he. No, master, these people have been like a fire that has never burned low, a veritable accumulation of ashes high and glowing. Now that fire is bursting into flames, and people are catching alight.

'One thing puzzles the people, that the Shemgridions have for so long kept their secret to themselves. We know this is not wholly true, but those who catch alight with Massia's love say these men must have kept a great treasure to themselves. So quick and apt are these Shemgridions to answer men's deepest questions, that men wonder why they had not heard them beforehand.'

‘Then, Roget, you and I must take one or two of them with us. We must venture forth, taking Morna with us, and Kanavah, and what think you—Aelfric himself? We have all tomorrow to set a fire agoing in this city. What think you?’

Roget eyes glowed. ‘Indeed, sire, that we must do. As for Aelfric, I wot not but that some might seek to storm us, to capture Aelfric and get him to mend his new ways. A riot might start for there is much argument around the streets. Me they never attack, nor would they attack thee, noble son of the Most High, for others now almost worship you. I think it were better to leave Aelfric.’

At this point he chuckled. ‘It will be something on the day of convocation for all to see Aelfric in his new body, for changed is all that from his dreadful old ways. He is a man in his right senses, as Massia brought old Roget to his, and—forgive me, my liege, for saying it—yourself, after that dying of yours near the Holy Mountain. Then there is this Kanavah.’

He chuckled again. ‘Massia has much laughter in his breast as he views old Roget, old Balwone, old Aelfric and old Kanavah.’

‘There is also Gothlic’, said Balwone, delirious with his own love for her.

‘Yes, sire’, Roget said, ‘but she was never old in the ways we were. She grew as a fair flower and she was always the ward of the Most High’.

‘Bless you for that’, Balwone shouted, cuffing his bosom friend. ‘Yes, Roget, we shall begin to light a blaze this convocation which shall sweep like a prairie fire across the eight northern kingdoms.’

‘They are his kingdoms’, said Roget soberly, but there were tears in his black eyes.

There was further talk with Paelfric. That monarch was most thoughtful, and the prince felt something had changed, even for the better, in the aged king’s thinking.

‘Strange happenings are taking place’, he told Balwone. ‘Gothroyd is on the march with a powerful army. None of his mounted men wear the cuirasses of seasoned leather, but theirs is of strong mail. All are equipped with broadswords, javelins,

dirks and the like. His infantry has many who are seasoned bowmen, and they have the long bows which are so deadly. It would take a long stand to defeat them, even if our outer bailey were able to be defended, which it is not.

‘We also have intelligence that there is much dissatisfaction within his troops. The slaying of Flamgrid has appalled many, and some of the royal guard have gagged in their minds at the massacre of the Shemgridions. It has ever been a custom in the lower kingdoms to let these people be, even as one lets fools or innocents go their own way. So Gothroyd may find his troops are not, all of them, loyal.

‘Now it is leaking out that Gothlic fled her father because of Flamgrid’s slaying, and that she herself feared for her life. No princess has had more loyalty and admiration given to her than this one. So Gothroyd will be fighting a battle within his heart and mind, and this will be so in the minds of many of his troops, though their battle be another one.

‘I have wished to have these words with you before the battle begins. I know you desire us not to fight, but I think it a betrayal of our people to expose them to this madman. We, too, are rallying old soldiers, veterans of another day. Even now Zenli is in conference with the lords he trusts. He has not called those known as malcontents, and many are zealous to defend our kingdom, and assert its rightful place amongst the other kingdoms.’

Balwone trembled with emotion. He longed that the king and his son the prince might not use arms against the coming enemy. He longed that such love would flow towards the army of Zed that they would surrender to Massia.

‘The old gods are yet strong’, said Paelfric. ‘Massia will defeat them, but it may take time. Come, Prince Balwone, history has it that many a nation has bowed to the armies of the new faith of Massia.’

Balwone nodded, and as he did tears fell from his eyes. ‘I have this in my heart, King Paelfric, that any nation who bowed to the new faith by the force of an army against it, never bowed from the depths of its heart. It has yet to be shown the love of Massia, which love it could not see when prodded by a pike. I

would plead with all my heart, Your Majesty, that you do not fire an arrow against this enemy of Massia or his troops.'

Now the eyes of Paelfric were deep with the thoughts of his heart, and he gazed at Balwone as though a mystic teaching a young disciple.

'I have not said we will set one arrow in flight, or raise one sword or javelin against the troops of Gothroyd. I, too, believe Massia has other plans than those we know, but to stand with the army that once subdued other kingdoms and yet make our witness to Massia is another thing.'

Balwone, whose mind had been filled with views of Gothic, and the surrender of all the kingdoms of the world to Massia, found his tears starting afresh. He would, there and then, have embraced the aged monarch, but he desisted.

'Your plan, King Paelfric, has astonished me. You have more faith in Massia than I have had in these hours. I expected him to do some miracle which would dissolve Gothroyd's coming upon us, but your mind is more astute than mine, and I salute you.'

'We will have more converse this new day', said Paelfric, 'for further news has come from the north. It is said that hordes of men, women and children are moving south from Mantria, Frimpone and Cautria. I wot, too, that even the royalty of those lands is coming with its people. These are strange days, Balwone, my son.'

This last affectionate term again moved Balwone and he rose to embrace this new father of the people of Cathrid.

'It is a day, sire, of which I have dreamed much of my life. I lost my wallet of old wisdom and found the golden sword of Massia to shine, if possible, even more brightly. Now that old wisdom has been restored to me, and much of it is one with the new. We shall see Massia in all his glory, if not in vision, then on the faces of his people. This is surely the day of Massia, and the heavens as well as the kingdoms of the earth shall know it.'

The king had taken on a new dignity, and a wisdom which Balwone recognised was beyond that of the old gods and lords. Now there could be no doubt that he was Massia's liege. Queen Paelmin he knew also to be one with her husband. Gothic had come with a sense of the greatness of Massia, and the shadow of

the slain Flamgrid was like a golden shadow across all the kingdoms.

Balwone trembled within himself, for he at least knew why he had been called 'Balwone the Great'. The heightened pride of his early days had perished miserably in the dust of the Holy Mountain, but his new self had risen and Massia had led him for such a day as this.

When Paelfric quietly withdrew from the throne room, Balwone fell sobbing to the floor, and there he lived again his entrance into the pure love of the Most High and of his Son Massia, and he renewed his allegiance to the Divine and Eternal One, and he knew the anointing of the Spirit who makes princes out of murderers, dark knights, and old priests of a dying faith.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Two Knights and a Squire Promote Holy Convocation and Prepare for the Morrow When It Will Happen

THE KING had called the two knights to a late supper. Balwone expected he would hear the result of Prince Zenli's discussions with the loyal lords.

He had spent some time gazing out across the countryside and especially down at the garden where on his last night in Cathrid, before his journeyings, he had been vouchsafed a vision or a visitation of Massia. The night had been flooded with the silver of moonlight, and in memory he could hear the sound of ducks on the lakes and the slow dignified movement across it of the swans. That night had been so peaceful, and it was there that Massia had enlarged his vision of the nations and the conquest that the Most High had planned to bring them back to himself, for he had created them and his love for them had never died.

Now, as he pondered that night, the memory of many things he had read in his manuscripts and historic events of the past came to his mind. Because he had the gift of a mind which quickly linked together things he had heard and things he himself had thought, he hurried to his wallet. He was grateful it was intact.

He knew each story and article by its own quality of vellum or parchment, and he quickly sifted through until he had in his hand the story which had come to his mind. As he read, his excitement grew, and he longed for the time of supper to hasten, for he had much to say to the king and the prince.

At supper the queen, Clanlo and Gothlic were present, much to his delight. He fought to keep his eyes from being only on Gothlic, but she was more contained and simply smiled when, from time to time, their eyes met. Much of what he wished to say to the king seemed to diminish in importance under the glow of the emotion which steadily grew within him. Eventually that part of the supper finished, and the royal ladies were escorted with dignity from the room. Kanavah also left for his quarters.

The three men sat close together in one corner, having dismissed the servants, and they began their conference. Zenli outlined the formation the troops would take, were intelligence received that Gothroyd was marching on Endomin. The lords, some of them having come to believe in Massia, and others moving in that direction, felt it would be good to affect a victory without cost of lives. Whilst Manignia had always had the largest army, and its reputation was of the greatest strength of the five northern kingdoms, it was felt that Gothroyd would not attempt to do battle with Cathrid unless that kingdom was prepared to submit because of some late conversion to Massia.

Balwone listened with deep interest. The lords were placing much trust in the outcome of the convocation, and had been impressed by the large numbers of the citizens who were pouring in from the three upper northern kingdoms. Gothroyd would certainly be presented with a horde of people on that day. Even his cruel mind could not contemplate a massacre of such proportions.

Paelfric was adamant that a show of great numbers would be sufficient to dampen Gothroyd's ardour in seeking a conflict.

One of the lords, a knight by the name of Semplin, had suggested they had Gothroyd defeated before even he began. The key to that defeat would be Gothlic, Princess of Zed.

Balwone felt his anger rising, but Prince Zenli waved a hand to calm him. 'Fear not, Prince Balwone', he said. 'The king and I soon finished that idea. We told him that Princess Gothlic was a guest and not a kidnapped victim. The protocol of all kingdoms is to allow royalty to move freely. Such protocol allowed you to leave Zed after you had witnessed the massacre of the Shemgridions. Princess Gothlic is our guest, no more and no less.'

Lord Semplin saw this and agreed we would not use the princess as a pawn of war.’

Balwone’s anger had died when he saw the princess was not to be used in making a bargain of peace with Gothroyd. There was also rising in him the delight of the story he had that day remembered, the details of which he had read with great eagerness, refreshing his memory.

He leaned forward eagerly, catching the eyes of the two men so that they were prepared to listen to him. It took some time to recount all the details of the event he was describing, but, even before he finished, his two listeners showed that they were entranced.

‘Why, of course!’ said King Paelfric, ‘This will surely avert war, and perhaps seal peace for our kingdom, as also for the other kingdoms’.

Prince Zenli was calmer, but no less convinced. His final observation was, ‘Much depends upon the convocation, upon those who will attend from afar, and upon any change of mind that may be wrought by it in the hearts of our people’.

With that acceptance of Balwone’s story, they began to work out details. The more they worked at them the simpler they became, and it was obvious that Gothroyd would face a formidable situation when he arrived in Cathrid.

The next morning the three men—Balwone, Kanavah and Roget — were up at dawn. They broke their fast, a hearty meal supplied by the palace kitchen, and made their way out of the royal bailey and down to the city. On the hill that rose from the common, and on the common itself, was a veritable horde of humanity. The three men were both amazed and delighted by it. They guessed that most of these would be from the three upper northern kingdoms, but as they went amongst them they found some of them to be of Cathrid, but with friends and relatives of those visiting. Having spent some time conversing with many of the newcomers and some Cathridions, they made their way to the market place.

This area was ablaze with the colours of all kinds of food and flowers. There were the rich shades of the vegetables, the fruit,

and also the clothing, along with bolts of cloth, some gaudy and cheap, others of fine hues and most expensive. There were stalls where sweets and wines were sold, and others of the apothecaries who dispensed medicines and health herbs. Painted toys for children were also available, and tools for tradesmen. Throughout the market were the smells of spices, curries and condiments, and already some folk were lining up for a breakfast such as they would not have had when at home. Troubadour groups had assembled and their music brought sweetness to the ever moving, ever restless crowds.

There were many folk spreading the news of the morrow’s convocation, and at times there were murmurs and even shouts of opposition. Some were quite angry and felt that it was an imposition. They were those waiting for the Festival of the Seasons, and they were feeling cheated, being sure as they were that that Festival would never take place, in that the convocation would displace it. The three men intervened time and again, and, as some folk knew the names of the three speaking in favour of the convocation, they seemed to be mollified.

Balwone watched a group of men who had been most vocal in their anger against the convocation. As they looked up at the giant Kanavah, they talked to one another.

‘If that great giant of a knight’, said one, ‘is for convocation, then who are we to oppose it?’. There was a murmur of agreement. The two knights and the squire were certainly helping to change the minds of many.

After a time the three men moved into the crowded area of the city, the suburbs where Aelfric had lived and where life was less pleasant and, indeed, more crude. At other times Balwone and Roget had found the place fairly deserted, but this day it was quite filled with folk, some doubtless from the other kingdoms meeting up with friends and relatives. Balwone and Roget suspected that some were thieves and pickpockets out to filch money and goods, whilst others were simply the less prosperous citizens of Cathrid, those not so fortunate in their lives, more or less hiding away in these slums.

The three men took every opportunity to talk with folk on the street, some who stood in doorways and others who leaned out of

unshuttered windows. On the whole, they were favourably received, and they came to realise that many were looking forward to the convocation, though not fully understanding its mode and purpose.

They emerged from a narrow street to something like a civic square, although it was, perhaps, too mean to take that grand title. There were poles that held torches at night and which would shed some light on the dismal district, but these had long ago been doused. Now young men wandered together, and Balwone imagined that at night they might prove to be a dangerous band. Others who were even more obviously hardened rogues looked with dislike and even anger at the three men. These were clearly a gang with savage intent. They stared at the clothing of the three men and although it was simple, they discerned that it was costly, and that they had at least two aristocrats in their midst. Roget they rightly took to be a servant, perhaps a squire of sorts.

When they heard Balwone, Kanavah and Roget giving out news of the convocation and encouraging people to attend, they began to jeer. There was no humour in their taunting, but bitter dislike and hatred. They turned to the others congregated in the civic square and began to urge them to attack the men.

‘They are not our sort’, they said. ‘Look at their clothing! Look at their well-fed bodies! They are rich, and we are poor. We starve whilst they feed upon us who labour for them so they can get their ill-gotten gains.’ It was an ancient grudge and not altogether true, but folk angry with life seized on it.

The gang of malcontents began to use provocative language, curses and vile denunciations, and so much so that the crowd, which to this point had been merely neutral, now began to show opposition. The leader of the pack was obviously enjoying his notoriety, for all were aware of the enormous size of the dark knight, and yet he seemed not to retort or threaten the mean-faced leader of the gang, who was aware the three were men of Massia, and therefore could not be easily goaded into responsive violence.

Balwone sensed the danger that was growing, but, since the wily fellow was addressing Kanavah and not himself, he said nothing. The pack leader then advanced, his clenched fists thrust up, ready to attack Kanavah. He knew his mob was as a pack of

cunning curs: they would rush even a powerful man, swarm all over him, knocking him down, bringing out murderous instruments and in a moment would have him wounded, and perhaps killed.

To the surprise of all, Kanavah walked forward to the gang-leader.

‘It is peace we set forth’, he said, ‘and not war. It is love we give and not hatred. Come, my brother, let us embrace and be at peace’.

The mean-faced man stared up at him, baffled. None of his fellow attackers had stepped forwards with him. The size of the giant knight was overwhelming, and they were nervous.

The gangleader decided to brazen it out. ‘Love’, he snarled, ‘and then what is this love? Maybe it is love of position and love of money, but not love of us’.

‘Oh yes’, said Kanavah warmly, ‘it is love of you and not those other things. Come let us prove it in a true embrace’.

With that, his mighty arms encircled the leader and crushed him in a powerful clinch. Within his arms, the man held by Kanavah looked helpless and terrified. Had the huge bear of a knight hugged with all his might he would have cracked every rib of his adversary. As it was the smaller man was nigh unto breathlessness.

Kanavah held him high until his victim, who was a small man, was dangling.

‘Such is the love we have to all’, said Kanavah, not for a moment thinking he was ridiculing the helpless gangleader. He put him down and opened his arms full wide to the whole gang. ‘Come’, he cried, ‘come anyone and be loved’.

Roget took courage and stepped forward. ‘Of a truth’, he cried, ‘I love thee, too, each one. Come, let us know the love of Massia’.

Some were laughing and some were quiet in amazement, and others were silent out of bewilderment. Suddenly, they all laughed, and even the crushed object of the knight’s affection smiled a rueful smile.

‘We have not seen such as this in a long time’, some said innocently, and at his words the laughing broke out afresh, first

as a chorus, and then as a season of delight which they could not and would not quench.

At that moment a troubadour band came traipsing up one of the streets, playing their instruments and singing a popular song. In a moment all joined in the merry ballad. The leader of the band disappeared into the crowd, but the crowd itself took up the song, and when it finished there was good humour everywhere.

On feeling the warmth of the people, the troubadours broke into a song which sang Massia's praise and of his great love, and with Kanavah in mind, and his demonstration of love, the crowd joined in with great gusto, as though attracted and fascinated by a new idea and experience. Some knew the song and some not, but their sheer love of singing drew them to share the lyric and the tune. People began to flock in from other streets, and when the three men slipped away they could hear a choir that would have rejoiced the heart of Massia himself. Certainly the small band delighted in the amity of the people.

Back in the market square and then on the common, they found a vast new inflow of visitors from all parts of the kingdom, and other streams flowing from the north from the upper kingdoms.

'Master', said Roget. 'Where will they put them all? I wot the hospitality of Cathrid is vast, but who could contain these who are so many?'

Kanavah said, 'They bring enough victuals and beverages to see them through the convocation. They will make their own place of eating and sleeping, and these days of Autumn are kind in their own way. Have no fear, Roget. Massia has called them out for a great witness to his love'.

When they began their return to the castle, they saw the preparations that were being made for the morrow and its holy gathering. Instead of the broad platform which would contain the leaders and the lords of the council being set on top of the northern side of the hill, it was placed on the southern perimeter, south even of the castle. Tall stakes had been driven in and rough flaxen ropes

were fencing off the northern common to those who would come from the south.

Roget looked puzzled. 'If such a weak fortification is set up to stem the army of Gothroyd, then we are surely a foolish people', he said. 'What is demanded is a stockade, a strong palisade of sharpened saplings and with javelins between. This is not true fortification.'

Balwone smiled, 'Friend Roget, it is not intended to be a barrier between Gothroyd's troops and ours. It is our estimate that the king of Zed will arrive about noontime of the day following the morrow. Then you will understand the purpose of this fence of staves and rope. Then you will understand much'. Roget flashed a grateful look at his master for the information.

'Yes, we shall surely see', he said, and there was no doubt in his voice. Kanavah, also, seemed satisfied with his companion's assurance.

For some moments the three men stood together, looking at the southern perimeter fence, so frail it was and yet destined to divide the invading troops from the people of Cathrid. Of the three, only Balwone could know what was to happen.

He turned to Roget. 'Settle well our three mounts', he said, 'and I will give instructions on the morrow which will cheer your heart. If having done this you have further time, then go again amongst the people, taking with you your beloved Shemgridions. Cause them to sing their ancient melodies and the new ones Massia has given in these years. These dear folk carry a fragrance of love and quiet joy wherever they go. Meanwhile, Kanavah and I will seek to speak with the Cathridion lords. In this way our convocation will be a time of joy, and much love'.

He looked at Roget and smiled. Then he looked across at Kanavah. 'Do not be in such strength when you embrace a man who is a stranger to Massia, lest he flee in fear from so great a love.'

The three men laughed heartily at this sally, and Balwone led the giant knight back to the castle. Once inside their quarters, the two men ate gratefully of the food that was set before them from the royal kitchen. As they ate, Balwone outlined the method King Paelfric had planned for the arrival of Gothroyd and his troops.

Hearing this Kanavah threw up his arms with great delight, and he guffawed so loudly that Balwone feared the servants might be alarmed, and even feel some preliminary invasion might be taking place.

Following the time of rest which generally followed the noontime meal, Balwone asked to have an audience with the Princess Gothlic. This was readily granted, and, as they met in the throne room, Balwone asked Gothlic if she would care to sit in the quietness of the royal garden beside the lake with its waterfowl and stately swans.

Led by the servants, they made their way to the garden and the two sat on the selfsame bench that Balwone had used the night when the vision of Massia was given to him.

All afternoon they sat, sometimes staring at the water and marvelling at the peace of the garden. Other times their gaze was upon each other. Both felt the strong physical urges that persons who are in love know wonderfully. They abandoned every care they had concerning the anger of Gothroyd and the alarming situation which was building up between Zed and Cathrid. These troubles were marvellously overcome by the delight they knew in being together.

What they did not know, and what others of the Council of Lords did not know, was that Gothroyd was urging on his troops, hoping to arrive at Endomin by noon the following day, having received intelligence of the convocation. It was a term which roused his hot anger and dark hatred, and he urged his troops to move, almost beyond their capacity and certainly beyond any good humour they may have possessed.

Had the ruling powers of the castle known this fact, they would have rested less peacefully. As it was, the day was occupied with yet more folk coming from the upper kingdoms. Roget, the troubadour bands and the Shemgridions rigged out in common garb were all making their impact in changing the minds of those who as yet had remained loyal to the ancient gods.

In the late afternoon, the prince and princess beckoned to the watchful servants and requested to be led back to the castle and to

their quarters. Balwone looked at Gothlic with deep and tender love, and her eyes returned the same emotion to him. Both wondered what the morrow would bring, and it was good that what would be on that morrow was hid from them both.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Powers of Darkness Come to Threaten on the Eve of Holy Convocation, But That Is Not All

BALWONE expected it: the night would not pass without an attack. It was the red dragon which appeared first of all, but it was as though it were not addressing the prince, but other princes and gods and lords. It was facing Balwone, who was grateful for the slim golden sword which was at his side. This, in itself, was a sign of an attack that was coming. For days he had sensed that something of a horrible nature was approaching, but had thought it might be the very attack that was to come from Gothroyd. In a way he had felt that the battle with Gothroyd would not be so difficult, but here was an army which was of another kind and order.

The red dragon seemed to change its colours as it twisted and turned sinuously, its red changing to a phosphorescent green, its green changing to a colour that was a dark blood red. Indeed it seemed as though blood were issuing from every pore of the dreadful beast, but this time he sensed a confidence in the creature that he had not known before.

Its bulbous yellow eyes took note of the sword, but its nostrils puffed a contemptuous 'Pah!', and a sulphurous stream of dragon-stench reached the nostrils of the young prophet. It was acrid, choking, and hot as hatred. Even so, the prince did not flinch. He wondered at the more-than-usual self-assured arrogance.

Now the enormous creature was roaring words of stinging vituperation.

'Balwone the Great!' came the scornful cry. 'A man who is a man and not a god. A man who calls himself a prophet, but cannot control his own mind, foul that it is towards the fair princess of Zed. How fleshly are his thoughts like slugs that crawl across a smooth and slippery mind. Sensuous and evil is the mind that would wield the sword of Massia. See, then, if the hand be strong enough.'

The beast looked down, hissed through its nostrils and sent a spray of stench upon the watching knight. 'His trust is in some clownish trick he would play upon the strong monarch of Zed. Look at him now sacrificing thousands of innocent men and women to the will of the conquering king of Zed, and this even unto the sweet princess he claims to love.'

'"Holy love", he says, but it is the love of a weakling, one who hides behind the skirts of his vaunted Lord Massia. We will see how it ends then, frail prince of peace.'

'Frail prince of peace' sent Balwone's mind racing back through his written scripts to the words of a conquering emperor who, at the end of his life which had been relentlessly cruel towards the people of the Most High, cried with bitterness as he was dying, 'Thou hast conquered, pale Galilean!'

Experience had taught the prince of Manignia the foolishness of arguing with this monstrous beast. The original serpent had had a beauty beyond many other creatures, but, having fattened itself down through the centuries upon the souls of men and women, it helped to make evil, had itself grown gross and evil, and its original comeliness had given way to a self-adoration and a haughtiness it had not so displayed in former, fairer days. The vileness of humanity had filled its belly, and it had fed upon this evil, and now expressed habitually what had not even been its own—the complex and terrifying cruelty, hatred, anger, wrath, malice and perverted impurity that flowed from the humanity it chose to demean and destroy. It well knew of the love of the Most High for his creation and, enraged, it was driven by the knowledge of that love to supplant it and substitute wrath for love, and pollution of spirit for the mind of holiness. Having

been created by the Most High, it was a creature of unspeakable self-perversion because of its jealousy of its Creator, and its compulsive desire and action to supplant the Maker who had given it such beauty and magnificence, such high intelligence and powers. How it had perverted these gifts of being and become the depraved creature it now was.

Now the beast twisted itself around and beckoned with its clawlike hands, and into sight came other loathsome creatures. Balwone had seen these before; beasts and giants which had once made him tremble in terror, but which now wearied him with their high pretensions and threats. One of them—the first—was the lumbering creature Sarxia. With him were even more spectacular self-named deities, but without them being named the prince knew who they were. One was there, Mourn the Terrible, the stupendous god of war to whom many peoples had given other names, but to the northern kingdoms he was known by this title. Balwone knew Mourn's powers were not slight for he had been the instigator and patron of many a bloody battle, and he fed upon the hatred of men for one another, and he cunningly fed that hatred until there were few years of gentle peace in the history of the human race. Even now, he was moving such kings as Gothroyd to believe they were justified in their destruction of their fellow human creatures.

Dark and dreadful, with choking and terrifying thickness of blackness about him, was Terebus who claimed to rule the affairs of the creation by night, as though it were his domain, thus superseding the One of light and serenity, the Most High himself. Out of Mourn the Terrible now came splittings of lightnings, great rollings of thunder, and his fierce and cruel face was as pale as death, but Terebus seemed almost to obliterate him with that blackness which sometimes descends upon the spirit of man, choking out the breath of life, or so darkening the inner spirit that in its agony it craves obliteration in death.

As though to counter this harsh evil, Fransca appeared, the one who claimed to give life, so that her smile seemed to counter the strong domination of the male gods, and promise a softness and a sweetness, even to cloying the despairing spirit until it came under the power of this seductive female deity, enthusing

the devotee to believe that he or she was somehow worthy of her smiles, her erotic stimulation with all the promises accompanying it. She brilliantly insinuated that all feminine creatures were endowed with her qualities and that they made life sensuously satisfying for men as they reached out and sought to be caught up in that mystique which made women so desirable, and yet so powerful in life. Somehow she reminded Balwone of Sarxia who could change from male giant to beautiful woman in a quick, delusive and seductive moment.

There was also Spattan, the god who claims to give life and fertility to all things. The Festival of the Seasons was one in which Fransca and Spattan enacted their love together in a riotous, sensual union, and thus brought to life the dead soil and woods, once frozen with winter, the seasonal time of death, and in their magnificent mating spread their fertilising powers to all things. From time immemorial these two had inspired the worship of flesh-crazed devotees, worshippers and addicts to the union of bodies without thought to the union of the spirits of wholesome men and women.

There were more such deities and gods, the idols of which represented to worshippers the reality that lay beyond them in this pantheon of gods. Balwone was grateful that the old sages had warned him of these imitations of the Most High God. Each claimed to be a vital part of the only true god, the one the red dragon would claim itself to be, but of whom it was not even a pale image. Year by year, these deities sought to work their worshippers into sensual states and orgies, or into mind brilliance which scorned those rites, but was as entrapped into intellectual pride, no less than were others in their sensual bondage. Balwone gazed at them unmoved, as though all he saw was an empty show. No longer did the red dragon freeze the blood in his veins with fear of its power, and its ability to crush and destroy. The more the shrieking and thundering and trumpeting of that crimson monstrosity grew, the more Balwone tired of such actions. He had never sought to know these creatures nor endeavoured to puzzle out the mystery of evil. The closest he had come to it was what he had been taught in his days with Flamgrid and the writings of the sages. The words in which he had been

taught this wisdom were so burned in his mind that he could recite them with his lips:

There be no such creatures as evil 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.

It was not that Balwone disbelieve such things as the dragons and giants existed, but to him the forms in which they appeared were symbols of a much deeper personal existence. They were, in their own way, creatures which the Most High had created, but they had distorted themselves from their original beauty, authority and power, and so could not reveal what they had once been. As symbols, they were significant of the degradation of the original beauty which had been theirs.

He also knew there was a spirit of some kind which he feared more deeply. What that spirit was, he did not fully know. It was not that he was in dread of it, but that it approached him through his conscience. Its attacks were like faint prickings at first, as though its proboscis was inserting itself into his conscience and then liberating its poison. The poison was acute, and in the ultimate seemed to be self-accusation, rather than the direct imputation of some spirit from outside himself. For example, the red dragon could rant and rave, but its indictment seemed empty now, to Balwone. This other unseen spirit had an insinuation that flicked the prince's self-examination into light. Often this would last for days, and then Balwone would suddenly remember the love of the Most High and the suffering Massia had had for his—Balwone's—failures and wrong doings, and he would be clear again. He would hear the songs of birds in a new and delightful

way, would be thrilled with flower-studded pastures, the soft winds that sang their strange songs through the fronds of the casuarinas, and he would become almost ecstatic with men and women and children, and in raptures at the thought of Gothic and Merom and Merphein—women of great beauty.

Whatever that unknown spirit was, the red dragon felt it was its hour of triumph, and bore down on Balwone with its threats and motions of intimidation.

'You would sacrifice the people of four kingdoms to achieve your goal. What of your goal for the golden egg of love and its failure on the Holy Mountain? Even your own evil smote you unto death. Now you would sacrifice countless lives to achieve your holy, spiritual aim, so-called. Away with you! You are no prophet. You mumble words you do not understand and speak of things you do not know.'

An evil, sulphurous chuckle came from the giant serpent. Then it grew dark with venom and vehemence. 'Look!' it said. 'Look at these great powers that have ruled the affairs of men for endless centuries. They have inhabited every dark place there. They have penetrated the world about, and their shrines and temples are everywhere. They inspire the mysterious worship, dances and orgies, bacchanals and revelry that humanity knows to its delight. They have supported armies against their enemies and they have rejoiced in the grand nobility of war, the excitement of destroying the foolish enemy, the ecstasy of flesh to flesh, the freedom from the bondage of foolish morality, the headiness of being free to do what the mind and body dictate. How, then, Balwone, will you beat this great force which tomorrow will march with Gothroyd of Zed?'

'Pah!' said Balwone, his patience ended. 'Give them a dose of this!' he cried and raised his golden sword. 'It will be enough and more than enough for them.'

He looked at the evil throng about the great dragon and waved his sword with dignity and reverence. 'This is not my weapon, and I may not use it as I choose, but I will wager it against all your lackeys and minions should they come against us. Let them be loosed from Gothroyd for their own good, else will they be demeaned and humiliated in the great contest of the coming day.

Who can hold out against the Most High and his beloved Lord Massia? Who can withstand the true Spirit of life, of which Spattan is but a faint shadow, and whose love can match his? Certainly not that of Fransca who imitates what she can never know.'

With that, the features of Mournna the Terrible became livid, grim, implacable, ruthless and murderous. Flashes of lightnings crackled across the skies, and bolts of thunder were loosed in terrifying clamour. The god Terebus cast a cloak of thick impenetrable blackness, and the cries of minor gods and foul spirits all sought to smother the prophet in their lethal enmity.

They were lost to him. He held the golden sword before his eyes and noticed again that it was as a glowing cross. A few moments of this contemplation silenced the threatening din and tumult of the crowd of creatures. This night even that silent spirit which sometimes haunted the depths of his heart must have also been banished by the presence of the sword by which Massia is empowered to smite the nations.

Balwone slept an almost dreamless sleep. Some flashes of the splendour of Massia visited him in rare moments, and the beauty of Gothlic was like mead; sweet mead to his serene spirit.

The day dawned with that spirit which has always attended joyful festivals. In the dawn the three men, who had risen together, made their way to the vast common. They could scarcely believe the sight that was there before them. It seemed to Balwone that here was a multitude such as no one could number. They were spread in all directions, and whilst some were sleeping, others were breaking their fast, and yet others were at their ablutions. It was clear to the three warriors that, by the opening of the convocation at dawn, there would be little space unoccupied for a vast distance around.

There were pickets on the fence made of pointed driven staves, and flaxen ropes. Workmen were putting their finishing touches to the great pavilion from which the celebrations would be directed. As the sun rose, the royal colours of the pavilion—royal blue and gold—were struck by its rays. Men, women and

children were settling themselves as close to the platform and dais as was possible. Stewards and others policed the area around the pavilion, as also the path through which royalty and lords must come to take their places for the great event.

All over the vast concourse, musicians were tuning their instruments in readiness for the worship to come. Balwone wondered how many of them were devotees or addicts of the old gods, and knew only the songs of those lords. He noted that Roget's Shemgridions wore common garb, but that many from other kingdoms wore their tribal clothes, and yet no one seemed to wonder or care what they wore. Indeed, the whole ground was a mass of colours, the variations of which were in themselves a thing of beauty. Once again Balwone wondered at the variety of persons, the differences in features, bodily shapes and sizes, dress, habits and personal dispositions and characters.

He felt the gentle warmth of the sun in the first zephyrs that had come with the parting dawn. The azure of the heavens reminded him of Gothlic's beautiful eyes, the depths of which he could never fully fathom, and he scanned the heavens for some sign of clouds, but as yet they remained soft and cool. He knew he would be required soon to return to the palace and be dressed in clothes fitting for the occasion, but as yet it was not asked of him to be accoutred with armour and side arms.

For some moments he listened to the playing of the troubadours and he realised that, whether by design or by accident, they were all playing the one song, and folk were rising to it, following the voices of the magnificent singers; singers who were both men and women. As he watched, it seemed that ripples of joy flowed through the great multitude, and he was sure that the people of the Most High were in the ascendancy, so far as numbers were concerned.

As he gazed, his spirit was caught in the wonder of love. He knew that his passion for Gothlic had lifted him out of the anguish he had always felt for the world since his painful death at the Holy Mountain, and day and night he knew that yearning that men and women might know what it is to be free in the glorious world of the Most High's creation. Now, for some reason which he could not understand, his spirit was triumphant over that other

spirit which sometimes penetrated to his deepest depth to infuse shame and remorse for a life not wholly lived to the full. This rich sense of the profound and comforting love of the Creator set him free in a manner so sweet that he could scarce bear its delight.

In that moment, he knew this was one of the great days in the history of mankind, and that the fruits of it would reach out beyond the eight northern kingdoms. His heart was high as he returned to the castle. As he was ascending the stone stairway, he looked up and saw the daughter of Gothroyd gazing down at him. On this rare occasion she was not being attended and, as he drew near, her smile was dazzling to him, so that he felt a weakening in his limbs, and seemed to stumble as he drew near to her.

Close by was the withdrawing room, and holding hands they made their way to it. A servant maid who was working in it withdrew as they found their favourite couch. In the mild ecstasy of the visitation of love from the Most High, he wished just to sit and gaze at her. She, for her part, seemed in like mood, but as their gaze penetrated one another, he saw a cloud come into her eyes, like a soft shadow that momentarily shades the sun.

'Dear Gothlic', he said, 'what clouds your eyes? What comes to you at this moment?'

Her smile set his pulse throbbing afresh, and he thought the cloud had dissolved, but it was not so. She was not troubled for herself, but for him.

'Balwone, Lord of my heart', she said, 'it mayhap that the outcome of these few days may chance to separate us'.

His heart leapt with momentary terror.

'Separate us?' he said. 'This cannot be. Massia has brought us together, and this is for ever.'

'True', she said, 'but love as you know, and as you have taught me, makes calls upon us that those outside of love can never hear and can never understand. Not that I rightly understand, but I know that whatever the outcome it will be well: all will be well'.

'Do you think that the convocation may not succeed, and that it may be attacked by forces beyond our control? Do you think our high hopes are but ill-founded?'

She took his hands in hers and bowed her head to kiss his hands, hands that had wielded the weapons of a jousting knight, and which had often grasped the golden sword which was the true word of Massia. Her heart pulsed with some wonder of this man who to her was strong and fine, not from the training of lordly chivalry, but with the rich wisdom of the ages come to him through searching, through Flamgrid's mentorship and from the Spirit which unveils the mysteries of the Eternal One to a simple human being.

She looked up through her tears and said, 'In truth, dear Balwone, I know not what will happen today, nor happen to us both. I know it will be for good of us, but the nature of it is hidden from me. I fear it not, but I would say these words so that what may come to us will not bring the pain of eternal loss'.

In spite of her words, or even because of them, Balwone felt his heart constrict. He slipped and knelt, holding her hands the while, as though they were his most precious possession.

'Dear love', he murmured. 'I know I need fear nought, but my heart is as though in a dream. I wish not to awake, but then I desire to know what is true within the will of our beloved Massia. I am sure he willed we should meet in this way this early morning. As I live, and as long as I have life, my heart will be knit to yours so that we may never be parted.'

He scarcely knew what he was saying, for the words came with a rush of tears that momentarily blinded him. He helped her to her feet, knowing she, too, must now prepare herself as part of the royal party. They embraced with the passion that had left them breathless on the yestereve, and a maid-in-waiting came to escort her back to her stateroom. Kanavah, too, was returning with his lumbering stride, and soon Balwone was being assisted by his squire Roget to be ready for the convocation.

He was dressed in his plumed hat, his long padded silk jacket, his coloured breeches and hosen, and he wore no side arms. Roget looked unusually handsome in a garb that befitted a squire. He, also, was without side arms.

As they walked towards the throne room where the royal party was assembling, Prince Zenli, attired somewhat like his fellow prince, hastened to Balwone. He drew him aside from Roget.

‘Prince Balwone, intelligence has just reached us that Gothroyd is well on his way to Cathrid. Reports advise us he has amassed a large army, far beyond anything Zed has known. It may even mean he will reach us in the afternoon, so that we must close our first session of the convocation that the people may eat at noon, and we will all be prepared for the arriving of the army.’

A faint smile appeared on his face. ‘We are not afraid, as you know, and we believe this day will go down in our history as the day of the triumph of the Most High and Massia for the kingdom of Cathrid, and all the kingdoms of the north.’

The two men grasped hands firmly, and together walked to the throne room, Roget following them, his mind filled with a deep curiosity.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Convocation Hears the Stories and Songs of Men Who Were Evil

THE TROUBADOUR groups were in full operation as the royal party emerged from the castle bailey. All were mounted, including the royal family, and it was the king with his queen who led the company. Ahead of them went the band with perfect precision in playing, led by the master of music, and a gasp of admiration went up from the vast audience. The troubadours ceased their singing and playing, and the whole concourse rose both in homage to the royal assembly and in order to catch a sight of it approaching. On either side rode the royal guard, all in shining armour. All cuirasses were of shining silver, as also was the mail. The helmets were surmounted with the blue and gold plumes, whilst the great shields were strapped to the back of each knight.

It was a sight designed to impress all who viewed it, and so stately were the great steeds with their high stepping march that the crowds broke into approbation. Balwone was aware that many eyes were cast on his beautiful stallion, Ballia, and that his mount was no less in splendour than the one ridden by Prince Zenli who paced abreast with him. Behind the two princes came Princess Clano with Princess Gothlic, and, at the sight of Gothlic, a great cheer went up, which grew into a roar of applause, the waves of which echoed around and around the low hills beyond the common.

Ostlers were waiting to take the mounts of the royal party, but the guards remained mounted on their steeds which stood calmly

and without movement. Nor were they disturbed by the magnificent fanfare played by a hundred trumpeters. This was followed by the stately anthem of the kingdom of Cathrid, and those of other kingdoms were also deeply stirred.

Now it was time for the king to address the people, and he motioned them to be seated. In spite of his age, he was vigorous in his speech. It may have been the sight of a crowd so large, far larger than had been in one place in the time of his life, and in any northern kingdom, that stirred him so deeply. Yet Balwone knew it was more than that. It was the fresh wonder which had come to the king from his encounter with the great Eternal One known as 'the Most High', and also with Massia through whom he had been brought to meet the Most High.

'We are met, today, to review our history as a nation; to remember our roots in an ancient past; and to acknowledge that we have long served the gods we believed to have made our world. Our culture and mode of living has been always linked with these deities, and we have long revered them, but with all they seem to have done, we have never been at peace in our own hearts.

'We have long heard the claims of our simple friends, the Shemgridions, and have concluded that they have developed a culture and religion which appeals to them, but that they have not dealt with the realities of life. They have not been a strong people, for they know nothing of the art of war; they do not take up arms against others; and they seem to live a secluded life. On these grounds we have rejected their Most High as being an invention of their minds.

'Even so, we have heard of the kingdoms of Mantria, Frimpone and Cautria as being places of peace and prosperity. Lord does not fight lord, feuds do not exist, the people are not oppressed by the rich and each man possesses his own soul. The worship of power is virtually absent, and sacrifice to idols, gods and lords is not observed.

'As you know, we live in this north and there are no highways along which trade and commerce move. We are in some kind of backwater where we are free from the oppression of the southern, the eastern and the western nations, yet we have heard that

many, indeed most of them, confess loyalty to the Most High and his servant Massia. Our kingdoms have clung to the old ways that we have loved, and to the gods whom we seek to serve, and to placate when it seems their anger is directed against us.'

The king paused. To this point there had been a total silence, and whilst the monarch prepared to deliver his main point, the silence remained unbroken.

'What have these gods and idols done for us? You will doubtless say, "Everything", but, when you ponder the matter, I am sure there is not one in the vast multitude who loves the great dragon, who has affection in his heart for Mournia the Terrible, who is grateful to Spattan who claims to give us life, or to that dreadful deity called Terebus who frightens us whenever thick blackness of darkness falls on the land. We do not love these gods, and often we hate them, but are yet afraid they may detect that hatred and punish us in dreadful ways. Over the centuries many have come to detest these deities, and have broken links with them, but they have no other god to whom they can turn except the idols of their own making.

'Why, then, did these other nations turn to the Most High? I leave it to you to determine that, but we have here, this morning, one who was very priest to the gods, who understood their ways and who learned the dark mysteries of their beings and their actions. He learned the mysteries of divination, sorcery, communion with the dead, and other things too terrible for our thinking.

'This one is here. We have been accused of capturing him, imprisoning him and even of torturing him. His name is Aelfric Collenthribben, a name and person you well know, and he is now going to speak to you.'

Up to this point the crowd had been respectful and had listened in polite silence, but from various points of the concourse came objections. Some were yelling out that Aelfric had been kidnapped, that he had been conditioned by intimidation to believe in the Most High, and that now he was being forced to speak for the Most High when he was no worshipper of that Shemgridion god. Others asked that they might address the multitude on behalf of the ancient gods who had always helped those who worshipped them.

With difficulty, the king quietened them. ‘Give way! Give way!’ he cried. ‘We are all men and women with the power to recognise whether a man is dragooned into a belief that his heart denies. Give way, and let this man speak. You will know in your hearts whether he lies, or whether he conforms through fear, or whether what he says is true. I wot that if he really believes in the Most High, that proves nothing in regard to the being of the Most High. We believed in the ancient gods, but that did not mean we loved them and looked to them with free hearts and minds. Therefore I ask you to give this man a hearing. It is for you to decide his state of mind and heart.’

There were loud murmurings, but after a time these ceased, and Aelfric rose, came to the edge of the platform and looked across the vast multitude. When the crowd saw him there were some cries: ‘This is not Aelfric Collenthribben but an imposter!’. Some said Aelfric was an old man, more frail, and a devotee of the gods, who ever lived in rags and dust, and wore his hair long. Everyone in that vast assembly knew that the great saints of the ancient gods rarely washed, allowed their hair to grow unkempt, wore ragged clothing and showed their holiness by denying a comfortable way of life. Hence they were often thin, haggard and frail.

It was Aelfric who calmed them down. He was indeed washed, no longer haggard because he had eaten well. His hair had been washed, as his body also, and so his old matted locks were clean, barbered and loose. The body had been subjected to denials of food and comfort, but now it was as the bodies of others, and the man could stand without difficulty. The eyes which had once been sunken in a death’s head were now open and gleaming. It was no wonder many had thought this person to be an imposter, but his first words were convincing enough, especially to those who had known him and had had traffic with him, seeking his intercessions with the gods who were angry with them.

‘Friends’, he said, ‘and those who have been my companions in worship of the old gods of our kingdoms, hear me. That I am Aelfric is evident. You may come to me later and talk with me if

you still do not believe I am he. Doubtless my changed bodily condition seems to make me a younger man, a person who no longer sees holiness in dirt and an animal-like way of living.

‘As you know, I opposed the worship of the one some call “the Most High”. To me the red dragon was “the Most High”. I thought he ruled all the world, and did so in his own right. I hated those who would not fall down before him. I studied the dark mysteries of the gods, and used powers which men called “supernatural”. I would do signs and wonders, aided by the gods, so as to convince worshippers never to leave these deities which I believed to be true.

‘Often I was responsible for the deaths of many. In myself, I was an evil man, and I coveted not only power, but also money, and I indulged in moral evil of every kind. No man or power on earth can change the heart of a person who desires to carry out evil and cruelty because he delights in it. Not even King Paelfric could have accomplished this. As for Balwone, I arranged for him to be killed, but my plan failed.

‘No, my friends, when it was thought I was betraying our old gods, then others set out to kill me. Had not Prince Balwone, squire Roget and some loving Shemgridions discovered me, and helped to heal my broken bones and wounded body, I would not be here, before you this day. I saw the gods set about to kill me, for they are cruel gods, but the servants of the Most High set about to save me from death and to take away the guilt of a dreadful life through the love of Massia’.

This time, when the silence was broken, there were no cries from the former followers of the priest. The silence did not break when he completed his message, but somewhere a simple singing voice was heard. It sang on singly, then another joined it and yet another took it up. It was an old Shemgridion lyric with plaintive music which could not fail to move the emotions of the listeners. Others joined in the song, and then all were singing. It seemed to be a gift of these northerners that they could pick up a song with ease, and even anticipate the words that would follow.

Aelfric remained immobile at the front of the platform, but then he, too, joined in, and was one with his listeners. After a time someone came forward to lead him back to his place.

It was impossible, at that point, that another should rise to talk with them, for the crowd passed from one song to another, and each song carried the message the king and Aelfric had been giving—of the freedom of the human race from the oppression of their inner guilt, and the tyranny of their consciences.

Paelfric said softly to Balwone, 'Our northern kingdoms are places of song, but the songs of Massia and his Most High are different from the old war ballads, from the peaceless songs sung in honour of power, the conquest by men of women, the spirit of revelry that becomes an orgy, and the crying out to the gods to respond to our sacrifices and to give us a place amongst the nations. These songs of the Shemgridions and the upper kingdoms are filled with love and joy and peace. When they sing of sorrow and suffering, it is not morbid, but strangely beautiful, wonderfully simple. Listen, Balwone, who could resist the artless simplicity of such songs?'

'Who indeed?' responded the prince. 'There is depth in these songs that outpaces many a traditional ballad, or the love songs of our ancient chivalry.'

He looked directly at Paelfric. 'You and I have never in our lifetime seen a multitude like this. Others would say it is the spirit of such a concourse which brings such songs to birth, but it is greater than that. A sage once wrote that ultimately everything will be music: all will be music. I wist not now the whole meaning of this, but I sense that we are creatures of song and melody and dance, and at that end all will be praise and worship, and yet it will be but the beginning of the most wonderful of all; our being taken up into the Most High, into his Massia and into his unseen Spirit.'

Paelfric looked out across the vast audience whose very presence moved him in powerful ways. He touched Balwone's knee.

'Go, my friend', he said, 'and tell them of that love around which your life has been lived'.

When Balwone stood, the songs began to die away. When he held up a hand, a silver silence enveloped all. With the silver silence was a golden sword, unseen, but working its work

through the mouth of the prophet. He felt a surge of supernal power, delight and joy go through his whole being. From being a man, a human being such as were all others, he felt the glory of the Most High flow through his body, his heart and his mind.

He said, 'I am Balwone of Manignia, but also of a greater city than any of us has ever seen. When we sing praises it is not to earthly kings, but the Great King. It is not of human kingdoms we sing, but of a Kingdom which was built to embrace all mankind; a Kingdom not ruled by men, but by Massia the Beloved. In this Kingdom men, women and children are one, none afore and none after the others. It is the Kingdom of love, born out of the heart of the Eternal Love, the Most High himself. That love was shown in the great suffering of Massia who, in his life, drew all into himself, and, in his death, freed them from the misery of their failure. Now he lives, and he moves ceaselessly through the nations. Today he has come in unseen glory to this kingdom of Cathrid, but he desires all kingdoms to be one under his rule of love. He does kill in order to conquer, but conquers in order to give true life to his people.

'I ask, therefore, that you hear me out as I tell my tale, and then I exhort you to think of Massia, and to ask yourselves who is king of your life and whether he is like unto this Lord of love'.

The people listened as he talked of his knowledge of a holy Presence from his birth; the yearnings that were in his heart; his years with Flamgrid; his quest that took him to the Holy Mountain; and the strange, terrible, and yet wonderful things which befell him there. He talked of the homecoming to Flamgrid, and the seeking out of the Shemgridions to learn of their ancient faith.

The folk of his audience had witnessed many strange events in their lives, and a massacre such as that of the Shemgridions was not a new event to their knowledge of the ways of men and nations, but a deep sigh issued from his listeners; a sigh that became a groan, and weeping ensued, both from Balwone and his listeners. Even so, many eyes shone when he talked of his pilgrimage to the upper northern kingdoms, and the renewing power which had come amongst them, and the birth of many new songs, and the renewal of their worship until it seemed that the

heavens had opened and the Most High became known in ways that drew out of them further wonderful worship.

‘This Kingdom belongs exclusively to no earthly kingdom’, he said. ‘The Shemgridions do not own it. It is a Kingdom that has ever been in the heart of the Most High, and he has placed over it the one we call Massia. His is the way of love, but it is also of justice and joy and peace. Our King moves out to destroy all evil, and to right the wrongs of many ages. It is into this Kingdom I call you to come today.’

When he finished these words, there was a sea of murmuring. Balwone could not discern whether it was of assent or of opposition, and, for all he knew, it could have been something of both. He turned and motioned Roget and Kanavah to come forward, and these two men of glittering black eyes and rough exteriors came at his bidding. Roget was a man of great height, and of solid build. Kanavah was of even greater height, and the breadth of him was beyond what is usually seen.

This time a softer sigh escaped the watchers. Balwone indicated Roget and said, ‘This man will tell you his history and of his love of Massia. Then Knight Kanavah of the kingdom of Miridon will tell of the encounters we had, and of the remarkable happenings in his life. From these you will know the stuff of which our Kingdom is made.’

Neither man was awkward. Faced with an audience which was like a vast ocean, and in which, as it were, waves flowed backwards and forwards, rose and fell, and deep emotions could have caused a conflagration either of love or of wrath, the two men knew what to share with those whose eyes were fixed upon them.

When Roget ended his story, a sigh, deeper now than ever, escaped from the tensed crowd. When Kanavah came forward to take Roget’s place, his whole being was strong and regal. He was no longer just an extraordinary sight, but a man of the power of love. He, too, told of his exploits in life, his aspirations as a knight, his anger with the gods, and his deep and bitter hatred of Balwone. He told of his disgust of what he thought to be

mealy-mouthed people of Massia, and his burning desire to destroy them should opportunity come.

‘I was a crazed man’, he said, ‘and I did acts which were cruel and unreasonable. This Balwone was the plague of my mind, not only because he beat me in the jousting and the tournament, but also because he bore the marks of peace and love; marks I abhorred, and which roused my rage even more’.

When he had finished his story, a quietness fell upon all. Balwone noted that not one child cried out, none was restless. It seemed that peace reigned. The king motioned to Balwone to go forward, and this the man did. In his hand was his elaina, and in his heart a song, which, if he had not sung it, would have caused him to burst with the withholding of it.

The first chords of the music came as his fingers caressed the strings. Then the music became firm, and throwing back his head he let his song be released. On this occasion no one sought to join in the song. Not only was it a new lyric, and not only was the music strangely fitted to it, but also all sensed it was the song that had been given to this man and he alone could deliver it.

*There is a Kingdom unknown to humans,
A Kingdom of love and increase.
The love flows from Massia and from the Most High,
And its reign is the reign of full peace.*

*The idols of old were the masters of men,
For the lords and the gods held full sway,
And burdens were carried—the guilt and the anguish—
And no one could take them away.*

*The wonder of loving, and glory of living
Were far from the idols’ delight.
The orgies of worship, the strivings of passion
Gave pleasures that died in the night.*

*The joys of communion and love of true union
Were far from the heart of the world.
The banners of love and those of compassion
Hung listless and never unfurled.*

*There's a Kingdom where Massia's love is the glory,
Communion is peace to the soul;
Compassion's the fashion, and freedom's the story,
And union makes everything whole.*

*Come, then, from your bondage, your terror and sorrow,
And live in the one who's Most High.
Your chains will be broken, and freedom betoken,
That liberty's pennants will fly.*

*All joy to all humans in love that's consuming,
All praise to the One who's Most High;
All worship to Massia and his compassion,
And his Spirit who ever is nigh.*

*Love's Kingdom in wisdom takes slaves in their burdens,
Transforming the world from its loss.
The eyes that are loving, for ever are moving,
And drawing all souls by its Cross.*

*The kingdoms appalling are steadily falling,
One only remains in its power,
'Tis Massia's Kingdom, immortal for ever,
And this is its unfailing hour.*

*Come join with the Master!
Come love now for ever!
Come live in his liberty's power!*

CHAPTER THIRTY~ONE

The Hour of Holy Convocation Becomes the Hour of Transformation and, Finally, the Hour of Confrontation

IT WAS the hour of true power and love, and none of it was of man's making. No sooner had Balwone ceased from singing his song than another broke out, and then another. All were singing in unison, but at the same time cries were breaking forth from different persons. Here a man stood with great joy, lifting his arms in praise, on the one hand almost inarticulate and on the other allowing cascades of joy and delight to break over those around him. Little children were as vocal, and here and there an aged person would struggle to his or her feet and begin thanking the Most High for the multitudinous blessings of life they had now come to realise had been from him.

Other things were also happening, and, as he listened, Balwone knew with intense joy that it was of such occasions as these he had read in his manuscripts. These were times of love's inbreaking and its outbreaking. Folk searched through the crowds, seeking out a person here and there to ask forgiveness for past sins and errors, past cruelties and bitternesses, and tears would flood forgiver and forgiven. Others were crying to the Most High for his grace and love of which the three men had spoken, and yet others were singing songs which throbbed from their breasts.

Those of all kingdoms represented in the grand audience were lost to an identity set out for them, moving as they did into the oneness of the Love-Kingdom of the Most High. The words used by Balwone, such as 'union', 'communion', 'liberty', were now part not only of their thinking, but also of their experience. By some kind of magnetism, many were drawn to the Shemgridions, and they showed their love for these they had once appeared to despise. Doubtless they had always admired these folk, but now all were one in the great Kingdom of Massia.

At one point, Paelfric moved across to Balwone and spoke quietly, not wanting to be heard by others. 'Gothroyd and his troops are but an hour or two away. There is much to be done before he arrives. We will try to calm the people and encourage them to eat and return for a further time of worship after they have broken fast at this time of noon. You are the one to hold them now, and yet not to give information of our plans to face the king of Zed and his soldiers.'

With some effort, Balwone quietened the huge concourse and doing this was no small thing, the perimeters of the crowd being so far-reaching. Something about his standing at the front of the pavilion, his hands raised to attract attention, had its effect. One after another, music groups ceased leading the singing of old songs and new ones which were spontaneously breaking forth. The stillness was, in itself, a remarkable event. Some power was obviously controlling the deep emotion and passion of the people.

'Brothers and sisters', Balwone said, 'this has been a great visitation of the Most High, and without doubt Massia is amongst us. We are all moved by the things which are happening in these days. Even so, many more things are about to happen, and I wot that this afternoon until the going down of the sun we shall witness even more wonderful events.'

'The king's pleasure is, then, that we break our fast without haste, yet without loss of time. Later you will understand why we have asked this of you. Some of you are so moved in your hearts and spirits that you would wish to sing on further and not eat, but we exhort you to take food and drink, and especially see

that your little ones are satisfied. One hour after noon we will reassemble and continue this convocation given to us by the Most High'.

Servants had brought food and drink from the castle, and the lords had gone off to arrange the king's pleasure in regard to the army. Many of the soldiers had been in the multitude, but they had been warned of a quick change from their ordinary raiment into their battle gear. Before the hour that followed the noon was completed, a strange sight presented itself to the convocation audience. Squadrons of armed soldiers were moving into position. There were companies of infantrymen all equipped with shields, side arms of short swords and dirks, and, behind them, men on foot who were similarly equipped, yet lacking shields, but nevertheless being protected by leather cuirasses.

Behind these were men in armour, all mounted, and with spears and javelins. On the left side of each saddle was a long broadsword, sheathed, but able to be withdrawn with ease even whilst the mounts were charging into battle. What was most remarkable was that the cuirasses of the unmounted men, and the large shields of the mounted troops, were emblazoned in white with an emblem few had ever seen. Indeed the letters were curious, and many asked as to their meaning, and it was disclosed to them that the central emblem was a cross and surmounting this two letters which represented Massia as the Servant of the Most High.

Some members of the convocation were dismayed, for they had come from kingdoms which supported no armies. Others, well-versed in the peace of Massia, were asking why such an army should be present on the day of convocation. Some of the Shemgridions approached Balwone and Roget, asking the meaning of this massing of a vast army. Roget could not inform them as to the meaning and purpose, but those who spoke with Balwone were seemingly satisfied.

Even so, having been fed and watered, the bulk of convocation worshippers seemed mainly to ignore the martial happenings, preferring to treat them as ceremonial and not as a military exercise.

Finally, the crowd was reassembled, and they were agreeably quiet and respectful when King Paelfric walked to the front of the pavilion. He was fully armed, and dressed in armour, though his visor was opened. Having stood thus, he removed his hel-met and laid it on a chair beside him. The air was charged with strong feeling and emotion. When the crowd looked at the army, they saw squadron after squadron of troops, unmounted and mounted, but none facing the pavilion and all looking to the south. They were in attack formation, but lacked the depth an army would have had which was immediately going into battle. Instead, the troops were stretched out to the east and west to such an extent that those on both extremities could not be seen, being lost, as they were, in the undulations that hid them from the concourse.

Replacing his helmet, King Paelfric mounted his beautiful steed, and rode with dignity to the front of the troops. He was followed by his armourbearer and two knights bearing the large banners of the royal arms. Paelfric turned to the north, facing the army, and as he did there was a cry from a general, and the troops came to attention and thus gave the royal salute.

The king commanded them to order arms, at which moment the troops, as one man, rested their weapons. Bows long and short were held close to the side, swords that had been raised were lowered and sheathed. Then, in the stillness, one command of the king could be heard.

It was 'About turn!'. The entire army, in unison, turned about, presenting itself in full dress.

A great sigh emanated from the concourse. Even those at the very rear must have seen something of the wonderful spectacle that the army presented.

All footmen were equipped with strong leather cuirasses which would help them to be saved from darts and arrows and, possibly, from some more penetrating weapons. Likewise, the mounted troops were protected by metal cuirasses. On them all were painted in gleaming white the emblems of Massia, the centre of which was a cross over blazing sun, and when, at a command from the general, all officers lifted their shields high, it was seen that the emblems were likewise painted vividly on them.

Gasp after gasp went through the gathered assembly. Then, as if all were tutored to be one mind, a great burst of clapping ensued, and the clapping grew to cheering, and then the cheering changed to the kingdom songs of the ones assembled. Because the emblems were not of Cathrid nor of Paelfric, but of Massia, the vast army took on another meaning. In one sense, it was a symbol of the unseen armies of Massia and the Most High, and in another, it meant that this kingdom was now under Lord Massia himself.

Balwone had formerly been asked by the king to make an explanation, and he came now to the front of the dais. After some moments the applause ceased, and that stillness which was like a sabbath rest of peace was present amongst them. He allowed moments to pass before he spoke.

'Brothers and sisters', he said. 'You are doubtless wondering at this happening which is before you, of the army of Cathrid being present at what we call "a holy convocation". Many of you, and especially those who belong to Massia, would refuse to take up arms. To kill another human being, even in what have been called "righteous wars", would be abhorrent to you.

'Why, then, do we have the impressive army here today? As you know, many of them, perhaps most of them, were in our meetings this morning. Now they are in army garb, and seemingly prepared for war, and in one sense this is true.'

He paused, choosing his words carefully. 'This afternoon, at almost any time now, the army of Gothroyd of Zed will reach us in this place. They have come to destroy all followers of the Most High and his Prince, Lord Massia.'

He paused to allow the audience to absorb his information. He could see the amazement in their eyes. In some there was fear, but in most, lack of comprehension, a complete bewilderment.

He went on. 'Many of you will know that for some time Cathrid has been questioning the rule of the old gods, and the wisdom of its sages, one of whom was Aelfric Collenthribben, whom you heard this morning. Those who followed the old gods believed there was one God who was above all, but they did not agree that he was the one whom we call "the Most High", and so

they refused to change their worship. A nation does not quickly change its gods, for with them are also that country's customs, and customs are dear to the hearts of the people.

'Those of us who follow Massia believe he is the servant of the Eternal, and plans to bring back all nations to obedience to the Most High. The prophets say that ultimately all gods will be destroyed and that one alone will be there to worship—the Most High himself, with Massia his servant, and his ancient Spirit who moves in the hearts of all men.

'Many years ago, in the first centuries which followed the exaltation of Massia into the presence of the Most High, there was a great emperor who held reign over many nations which had been conquered by former leaders of his kingdom. These rulers had rejected the unseen kingdom of Massia, and so Massia's followers were persecuted in the way Shemgridions are made to suffer in some kingdoms today. One day, as this emperor was going against another powerful emperor, he saw a sight which finally changed his life. He saw, against the strong light of the sun, a brilliant shining forth of a cross, the symbol of Massia himself, and on this cross was an inscription, "By This, Conquer!". That night, Massia appeared to him and directed him to make a standard on which was this Cross, and the words which the emperor had seen were to be inscribed. I have an account of this in the old writings of wisdom which I have studied for many years, and although some descriptions of the event differ somewhat, we believe it is by this cross we shall conquer, even though it may happen that much of our blood may be spilt this day.'

Again he saw fear in some eyes, but others shone and glowed, and they were not perturbed, but were at peace.

'When Gothroyd arrives, he is determined to massacre all of us who believe in Massia, and he will be glad if we do not raise our arms against him. Not long ago he destroyed a whole village of Shemgridions who lived in his royal forest.

'I adjure you not to be alarmed. He does not know what he will meet, so secretly he has made his plans. As many of you know, his daughter the Princess Gothlic is with us. She is not a prisoner of this kingdom, nor is she one who has been taken and

brought here by force. For her own reasons she has come, and perhaps in anger at this happening, Gothroyd comes with his army to take her back.

'Our trust is in Massia, that he will do well. So, then, we await the coming of Gothroyd's army. As you have seen, we have made a frail fence, and this is to divide the Cathridion army from outside, and you from within it. It is a line we have set that Gothroyd and his men must not pass. I cannot tell you what might happen if he attempts to so do. For the moment you must trust us that there will be no blood shed.

'Now, my friends, we are not alone this day, nor are we forsaken. This is not the day of Gothroyd, but the day of Massia, and he is King of kings and Lord of lords, and behind him are the great hosts of spiritual creatures which are spiritual powers already reigning in heaven and on earth. As that emperor of old was told "By This, Conquer!", so by that same cross we, too, shall conquer, though not by human weapons, for by human weapons no man's will is truly changed. Look you now!'

With those words, Balwone, with his right hand, pulled from a gilded scabbard on his left side a slim sword, golden in colour, and held it high. The afternoon sun was brilliantly reflected from it, and at the sight of it there was first a deep resounding groan, and then a high cry of triumph. Few had seen this sword until now, but many had heard of it, even those whose worship had been of the old gods, and whose faith had been in them.

The cry that went up was, 'The sword of the Most High and of Massia!'

Three times this cry rang out, and an ancient song in regard to the golden weapon was started up by the troubadour groups. The whole concourse seemed gripped by it, as though unable to do ought but join the song, and Gothroyd and his army, who were now drawing near, must have heard the strong paean of praise. There may well have been that power which obtains in all large multitudes when speaking or singing or dancing proceeds, but the heart of the adulation was sound. Three times the song was sung, and at the ceasing of it there was again that silver silence which betokened joy and peace and love in the gathered assembly.

It was into that silence that Princess Gothic rode, and, with a sense of growing wonder, the whole crowd stood and watched. She was not in armour, but dressed in royal blue, and wearing a golden crown, and all noted that these were the royal colours of Cathrid, not of Zed. She was attended by an escort of two men, those who had helped her escape from the palace castle of Gothric in Zed. All who were close enough could see she was calm and held herself regally. The crowd parted to let her through, and the ranks of the army were also temporarily broken that she might make her way to where Paelfric, king of Cathrid, waited for the coming of the army of Gothroyd. As yet the whole army faced inwards to the frail division fence, to hear the words of Prince Balwone.

Some intelligence of the princess's coming to Cathrid, and her love for Balwone, had filtered through, but as yet not all knew she had fled from her father, and sought refuge in the palace of King Paelfric and Queen Paelmin. There was much talk amongst the people, but, even had some explanations not been forthcoming, the fact was evident that the princess had taken her stand with Cathrid. As this knowledge sank into the minds of the people of the convocation, they began to chant: 'Princess Gothic of Zed! Princess Gothic of Zed! Princess of the Most High!'

As Balwone heard the slogan increase in volume and enthusiasm, his heart expanded, and tears welled into his eyes. He was not a man of slogans, for he had little trust in most enthusiasms, especially crowd enthusiasms, but his heart wanted to cry out as though he were one with them. Even so, he raised his right hand, and gradually the noise abated. He held the mailed fist high and moved into the last of his oration.

'Friends', he cried, 'Gothroyd will never change his loyalty to the old gods and the old ways by arguments or by battles with weapons. Only the golden sword of Massia can prevail, and even at this moment his battle is against that sword. No one has done him harm, but he has harmed many. He must daily and nightly face his own conscience. He and his army are almost upon us now, and he should find us not warlike, but people of peace. He should find us not shouting angry slogans against him, but giving adulation to the Most High, for this Most High always

was, and he was before the gods and lords which some call ancients, but which were bred by the ancient serpent who beguiled humanity and spiritual creatures in order to set up his own kingdom.

'Hear ye, then. This is the day of our holy convocation, and today the hearts of many have been turned to Massia, and those who have long been dry and parched in the faith have been freshened, and their thirst quenched. Pray, then, for King Paelfric, as he will soon face Gothroyd and intercede for the army of Cathrid, that this day no drop of human blood may be spilt. Pray, too, for Princess Gothic, as she will stand before her father. Pray also for King Gothroyd and his troops, some of whom are believers in Massia. Pray for yourselves that you may conduct your way of worship and love in a manner befitting to your loyalty to the Most High. Pray, also, for me, Balwone, that I may know and do the will of our Lord Massia in these events'.

For a few minutes there was silence as the bidding prayer of the prophet concluded, and then, on every side, applause broke out, and the sound of it thundered across the green turf, north, south, east and west.

Gothroyd and his troops heard the sound of it as they approached under the lee of the last undulation ere they would rise to see the troops of Paelfric, and the vast concourse of the members of holy convocation.

They heard the thunder of applause, and they wondered at it, but even more, they wondered at the sweet sound of singing. It, too, was full in its volume, and it was more fear-provoking than anything they had heard or seen in their lifetime. Even so, their ranks were unbroken, and even as they rose above the last ridge of the prairie, and as they moved steadily towards the army which at that moment had its back to the oncoming force, they felt the inner thrill that all fighting troops know before an engagement.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The Two Armies of Zed and Cathrid Meet, and There Is a Battle to Save Those Who Would Follow Lord Massia

THE CONCOURSE of the convocation was on its feet, singing with deep feeling, and the more so since it could see the terrifying sight of a great army advancing on it. As it appeared, Balwone had mounted his famous steed, the great white stallion Ballia, and was picking his way towards Paelfric on whose right hand he placed himself. In the face of the volume of singing, Paelfric raised his right hand and shouted, 'All Troops! About turn!'

The horses wheeled in one motion, and the cavalry faced the cavalry of Gothroyd. The troops of footmen had turned smartly, in regimental order, and were facing the infantry of the other army. It was to the utter surprise of the troops of the Zedian army to see every cuirass and every shield of the Cathridion troops depicting in vivid white the cross of Massia, set on a golden sun, and the symbols of Massia in the same vivid white. As they looked to left and to right, there was no limit to the length of the setting of the troops of Cathrid. Doubtless there was deep dread in the hearts of many, for they had only been told they were there to wipe out the scourge of Massia and to maintain for ever the culture and customs of the ancient gods. Some were themselves people of the Most High who had been conscripted against their own wills. Others had little interest in any gods, old or new, and yet others were faithful to their ancient gods and customs, but

had no will to go to war with other nations over such matters. Of course, there was the heart of the army which was for the king of Zed, and the loot which they supposed such forays would yield.

Whatever were the feelings of Gothroyd, and he must have been immensely surprised by the size of the opposing army, he did not indicate them. He was certainly amazed to see such a vast concourse of people as those who were now singing. Within, his anger increased to the pitch of what was known commonly as 'boiling bowels'. Even so, as a trained king, he let no feelings show. He had to speak above the volume of the singing multitude, and so raised his right hand and shouted, 'Troops of Zed! Halt!'

The well-trained cavalry halted in unison, ever a remarkable execution of a difficult order. The foot soldiers halted in one step. All were at the attention position. The pennants of the Zed army were drooped because of the lack of breeze, but they were many and attractively colourful in the afternoon sun. Gothroyd, himself, was an impressive figure, strong and commanding, and, being in armour that also glittered in the sun, could have struck fear into many a heart, had it not been that they were still singing, and their song was a majestic one about the Most High, so that not one note of fear was heard.

The standard-bearer was mounted and now stood beside Gothroyd. The standard was large, manufactured of the finest white linen, thick and substantial. It hung from the golden crosspiece, and depicted the escutcheon of the Royal House of Zed, its central figure being a golden lion courant with a crown above it, and below it crossed swords and the motto, which although it could not be read at a distance, bore the words, '**Invincible in Integrity**'.

Paelfric's standard-bearer stood between Gothlic and the king. The standard was in royal blue silk which was padded and so also was substantial. At its centre was a lion rampant and above it was a crown, both in gold. On both sides were equally presented the amorial weapons of the day, crossed javelins, swords and lances, all depicted in black, whilst below was the ancient motto, '**In Truth We Trust**'.

Between Balwone and the king stood another standard-bearer. His was a new standard, also in the royal blue of Cathrid, and in the centre was a flaring sun, but extended above, below, and at the sides, a cross in vivid white, whilst at left and right of the cross the symbols of Massia were inscribed. Below the extremity of the cross and in golden letters were the words, **'In This We Conquer'**.

Because of the proximity of the two armies, both could read the standards that confronted them. Before the two monarchs began their converse, a Cathridion knight rode forward bearing a high banner in plain white, and he halted some yards short of Gothroyd.

'Sire', he said, 'King Paelfric desires to have converse before the commencement of any hostility. Be pleased to give us this privilege'.

Since this was the accepted protocol of the day, the king bowed acknowledgment, and on that act the knight carried his banner of peace until he was midway between the two monarchs. He then ordered his mount to sidestep to the left, which it did in rather remarkable fashion. The two kings now faced one another.

Paelfric spoke in a loud voice. 'Do we well to speak at this distance or would you have us meet in the centre?'

'We do well to speak aloud where we are', said the king of Zed. 'It is meet that all should hear our conversation.'

Paelfric bowed slightly and, straightening up, began the parley.

'What is your intention in coming to us with so great an army, Gothroyd of Zed?'

'My intentions are three. The first is to regain my daughter whom you have enticed from me. The second is to capture Balwone of Manignia and bring him to trial. The third is to overcome the king of Cathrid and his whole kingdom and so defeat the cunning plans of those who call themselves the people of the Most High.'

Paelfric said, 'Is it then your intention to massacre the people of the Most High as you massacred the village of Shemgridions who dwelled in your royal forest?'

Gothroyd could scarcely contain his anger, and he fumbled with his words. 'It is my intention to destroy every man, woman and child who does not renounce the Most High and his miserable lackey, Massia.'

The singing had ceased, and a deadly silence had settled over both armies. When Gothroyd's angry reply was heard, the silence continued, but murmurs broke out, and some of these were in Gothroyd's own army, though whether they were murmurs of agreement or of protest he did not know. In justification of this bloody intention he continued.

'Your so-called Most High and your Massia have depleted the courage of men of the northern kingdoms, kingdoms which were once renowned for their bravery and fortitude. In destroying these weaklings, we shall again strengthen our nations and be admired amongst the others.'

'Then', retorted Paelfric, 'you would lay the scourge of your own conscience upon the fair consciences of your own troops. You would encourage them to senseless slaughter so that they must live with the memory of a day which will go down in history as the most cowardly and cruel of all times'.

'There have been other such times of slaying', said Gothroyd, 'and the liberation of my nation, and other nations, from the deadly disease of your cowardly thing called "love", will vindicate my name in history and calm the consciences of my troops'.

'If that be your decision', said Paelfric, 'then so be it. Know you, however, that the Princess Gothlic will never return to you. She has informed me that she has with her a sharp dirk, and with one sharp act she will join the multitude of believers whom you seek to slay. She will never allow herself to return to such a bloody man who calls himself her father'.

Even at the distance he was from Gothroyd, Paelfric could see the shudder that went through the man. He could not see his face, albeit the visor was lifted, but Paelfric was certain that the man's countenance had paled, so deep was his love for his daughter. Paelfric continued with his words to Gothroyd.

'You say she was enticed from your palace by Prince Balwone of Manignia. This was not the case. Long has she seen the virtues of the people of the Most High, and also the Most High

himself and Massia his Servant. It was of her own will that she came to us, and though we sought to persuade her to return, she could not bear to do so. Charge not Balwone with such enticement, for not once did he seek to draw her from your charge. Indeed, he had commended her to stay and be as loyal to you as her conscience permitted.'

Gothroyd remained silent, and so Paelfric continued. 'As for Prince Balwone, he has long been a pupil of Flamgrid, the great sage whom all in these lower kingdoms admired for his gentleness and his wisdom, and you, yourself, recognised his place within our kingdoms. He was taken prisoner for his love for the Shemgridions and his sympathy for them. It was he who was humble enough to learn from them, in order to become a yet greater servant to us all. What, then, have you against this Balwone that you would bring the prince of another nation to trial within your own courts? This, as you know, is without precedent in the common customs of our kingdoms.'

Gothroyd roared in anger. 'What time has he for our times and our customs? What partiality should we show to him who would destroy our kingdoms under that cursed banner which now confronts me in all its evil smoothness. Love? Pah! This is not the way strong men love. Weak women may do thus, but not the spawn of Mournna the Terrible, Spattan and Terebus, and all the ancient deities.'

Paelfric bowed again. 'I hear your talk of great power and strength, and of the weakness of women. Your daughter be also weak in her love for Massia and the Most High God, but none has ever accused her of weakness in her character. Is it weak to give your life for the ones you love? That is true love, to give life and not to take it. She will give her life for Massia whilst taking it from your murderous hands.'

Balwone thought that from anger at this taunting, Gothroyd would urge on his troops to finish the conversation, but the knight with the white standard of peace for the time of discussion still stood between the two armies.

'Enough of this talk concerning the old and the new gods', shouted Gothroyd. 'It is not for debate I came. Let us be finished, and let the battle begin.'

'We are not yet finished', Paelfric said sternly. 'It is our old custom to lay our reasons for battle. This is called chivalry and courtesy, and we all do well to do things in a courtly way. You have set a feast of murder before you if you will, but first give good reason why you should come against us in such fashion, and the minds of all will be clear, those who now stand against you, and those who now stand with you. Cathrid never sought to attack you, or carry war into your royal realm, but you have chosen to do this with us. Hence you must give clear reason for such action.'

Gothroyd was now snarling. 'Brave words, no doubt, but if you should defeat us with so large an army and so vast a concourse of people who will doubtless also fight, and amongst whom there are surely many weapons concealed, then you will tell your story to many nations. Let be. Let us come to battle.'

The silence that ensued was the silence great men often hear to their dread, for it carries the knowledge that the consensus of the hearers is not for the speaker. Gothroyd realised this, and somewhere there were the uprisings within him of his own conscience. There were prickings he did not like, and he let his anger rise to drown the most powerful voice every human knows.

'Mark this, King Gothroyd', said Paelfric, 'that you are wrong when you say we have brought these people here to confront you. Let it be known to you, that if my vast army, and this greater concourse than you have ever seen in your life, were now to be let loose on you, you would never win the engagement. You say some amongst these singers and worshippers have weapons, but none has weapons except those who may have planned to betray us to your ambition to massacre us. Be it known to you, Gothroyd of Zed, that if we were to follow the customs of our warlike nations and so were to do the bidding of Mournna the god of war, and others of his ilk, then only a sad remnant of your army would return to their loved ones, and many of them would be maimed and crushed for ever in spirit'.

Now Gothroyd glared with wild eyes. 'Let us then to the battle. Let us see what will follow.'

'Nay', said Paelfric, 'no weapon shall be waged against you this day, but one, and that is the golden sword of Massia, by

which he is smiting the nations. That sword your eyes will not even see, because they have been beholden that you see it not. Prince Balwone has used this sword against the red dragon and prevailed over him. He has used it against the great god Sarxia and has prevailed. He has used it against the gods we know as Mournia, and Spattan, and Terebus, and has prevailed. How, then, can you prevail against a sword such as that’.

Gothroyd looked towards Balwone. ‘Come, then’, he sneered. ‘Come, Balwone, and we will try out swords; yours that you call the weapon of Massia and my broadsword, against which never another man has prevailed.’

When Balwone declined with a shake of the head, Gothroyd turned to Paelfric.

‘By the gods’, he said, ‘did I hear you say not one weapon would be raised against us other than Balwone’s one weapon?’.

‘That is true’, said Paelfric. ‘You and your troops may now have their way. They may murder without resistance, as indeed they did in the village of the Shemgridions who had been taught not to resist but to love, even in death, those who do ill to them. So have we learned from Massia that this is the way of true love. I will wager you, Gothroyd, that within the hearts of those who killed the Shemgridions at your command, the golden sword—the word of Massia—twists daily and causes pangs of intolerable pain. You are now about to commit your troops to the darkest years of their lives. They will return untouched, but their own consciences will accuse them of being more diseased than a leper, and more cruel than they believed any human being could be to another. Now they may excuse themselves because of your royal command, but there is a higher royal command to love all men which is above your insane demand upon them. A king should be father to his people, but you will prove yourself an ogre of evil if you once give them the word to fall upon us. You shall live to see the day when they will hate you fiercely for the harm you will have done this day, were you to destroy us.’

Gothroyd was in silence, thinking furiously. There was that other silence, also attending him, the silence of disapproval of almost all his listeners.

‘You mean you will not fight to the last man, woman and child? You will accept the slaying of all your vast army and these people of Cathrid?’

The king nodded, and added, ‘Not only of Cathrid but those also of Mantria, Frimpone and Cautria; thousands who have come to holy convocation with us. You will also be bound to slay them. Now listen to them, for they have a famous song of love. Give them this moment before you slay them’.

Gothroyd was obviously nonplussed, and the huge crowd, who had known nothing of this meeting of the two kings apart from that which they had been told in the morning, without hesitation swept into a great song of Massia’s love. Gothroyd, his ears set against such nonsense, was, nevertheless, forced to listen. As the singing proceeded, he looked across at his daughter and was amazed to hear the richness and clarity and beauty of her voice. A knight moved forwards from the ranks, and it was the famous warrior of Miridon, known as Kanavah the Dark, but there was no shadow on this man’s face. It shone like the sun on the standard of Cathrid. Another came and stood by Balwone’s horse, and it was Roget the squire of the prince, and his voice also was powerful, but the voice charged beyond all with power was that of Kanavah. His throat poured forth such liquid movement, and Gothroyd had to admit to himself that this man was no weakling. He knew, too, that the squire Roget and the prince, Balwone, were not men of weakness, and his heart told him that the aged Paelfric had dignity and authority which none could best.

Then, to Gothroyd’s surprise and curiosity, another man stepped from the crowd, making his way through the troops, finally standing beside Gothic. That he was an aging man Gothroyd did not doubt, and he sought to place this person, searching for him in his memory. What came to him from that memory shocked him. The man standing beside his daughter’s mount was Aelfric Collenthribben. He was staring at Gothroyd, but his lips were moving in the strong, strong song of love that all were singing.

For the first time in the whole battle of words between the two monarchs, the king of Zed felt fear stir within him. It was the Aelfric who would often attend Zed’s Festival of the Seasons,

and move the crowds with such passion and emotion that they were almost demented. Wild orgies would be spawned from his words, and bacchanals, and great tournaments that spilled blood and excited the audiences. Here, now, was a quiet man; a man whose eyes were deep with wisdom, and whose mouth gladly sang the songs of Massia.

Gothroyd was maddened, but allowed the song to come to its close.

'Let be, then', he said, 'all this talk, this emotion, this womanish sentimentality. Let us get down to facts. I am about to launch my men upon your people, and will you let them thus die, and will you not seek to defend them? Have you no love, this love of which you sing? Will you be a coward and not do battle for them?'

Paelfric looked grave and stern. 'It is you who are the coward, who would let your troops upon such a helpless mass of soldiers and people. I doubt not that some who are not of Massia will either flee or stand and fight, but they will be few and will make no difference to the outcome. There will be some amongst your own troops who are followers of Massia, and they will rather kill themselves than these their brethren. Give the order, then, and we will submit to death.'

Gothroyd was paralysed by the prospect before him. His whole being was now in revulsion of unprotected, wholesale slaughter. The massacre of the Shemgridions had not given him joy in the days that followed. Yet he was bound to go ahead, and in his heart he cursed the wisdom of Massia and of Paelfric. He addressed the king of Cathrid.

'In these circumstances', he said, 'I will have mercy. I will receive your crown and your homage, and I will exact scutage. This will prevent what you call massacre, and your people will be saved'.

'My crown is not mine to give to you', Paelfric said, 'nor have you won a battle for it, for none has been waged. To give you this kingdom when it belongs to Massia is not in my province, and, were it so, I still would not give it into your hands. As for scutage or for other taxes and indemnities you might demand, I would not submit to such infamy. No, you must

first earn your kingdom by bloody slaughter on those who will not resist you, and thus bring a dark blot on your escutcheon, and earn yourself infamy in the halls of history'.

The silence came again, but this time it was not silver. It was as though two armies pronounced judgment upon the monarch of Zed. Apart from some criminal minds amongst the troops, and some who had a lust for loot, none was with the king. Even the evil ones saw the heinousness of such an act. Gothroyd's pride and his hatred of Massia would not let him withdraw, but even his mind was seeing the evil of ruling for a massacre.

It was at this point, and into the silence, that Gothlic spoke. She had urged her mount forward and drew up within some yards of her father, but she did not address him as Father.

'Your Majesty, king of Zed', she said in clear tones. 'I will become your prisoner, if you will but desist from the destruction of this people. You may try me if you will for what you might call treason. I will submit to any decision on that score. I will not come as a stubborn and rebellious woman, but as a servant of Massia and maid of the Lord Most High, and I will love you, as Massia has commanded, even though my own humanity would have me do otherwise. Spare this people and I will come.'

At that point Balwone rode forward, his Ballia level with the princess's mount.

'King Gothroyd', he said, 'I also will return with you to Zed and join my plea that you spare these beloved people of the Most High. Against all protocol of chivalry and courtesy, I will accept being submitted to trial by your courts, and will accept the punishment, even if it is to be the same as you meted out to my old mentor Flamgrid'.

Both acts of surrender left the king speechless. His heart went out to his daughter, and a gleam of the truth he so hated seemed to reach him. As for Balwone, he admired him, and knew in that moment that these two were lovers, and lovers of a pure and high order. His spirit was deeply moved.

Their surrender had come as an act of escape for him from the predicament in which he now found himself. The face of Zed had been saved. None would dispute his acceptance of their surrender

and his refusal to indulge in massacre. At worst, his compatriots who wished to see the old gods triumph would be critical, and at best he would be exonerated as a monarch of wisdom.

Ignoring his daughter and Balwone, he rode up to Paelfric, passing by the knight who bore the large peace banner of white.

'King Paelfric, I salute you.' And this he did. 'Moreover I will accept the surrender of my daughter and Prince Balwone. I cannot assure you that no harm will come to them. I will now withdraw my troops, and I will not submit these two to ignominy. They will not be taken away under guard, but I will trust them, on their royal honour, to proceed to Gothric and the Royal castle, beginning on the morrow. Had I not had a holy zeal for the old ways and manners, and had I not had respect for our ancient deities, then none of this would have happened. As it is, I do not regret what has happened. You have joined the upper northern kingdoms in their way of life and what they call peace. I regret such a move, but I admire you for your integrity. Our motto has become yours. I bid you farewell.'

Paelfric bowed from the waist. 'I thank you for what you may call clemency, but my heart aches for the two who will accompany you. I plead true justice for them and recommend our ancient motto.

'I had hoped for even better things. We had prepared a fine banquet for you and your lords, but doubtless you will think it does not fit the occasion.'

'I am moved by your invitation', said Gothroyd and crinkles appeared at the corners of his eyes. 'Were you, then, so sure of the outcome, that you would prepare even a banquet?'

'Aye', said the king, 'and not only for you and your lords, but for all your troops. As you will know that is a tall order, but we had prepared. Know, then, that we love all men, and think this not to be weakness but true strength'.

On that, the two monarchs parted. As they did, three men pressed forward to speak to the king of Zed.

'Majesty', they said, 'wilt thou be gracious enough to take us to your kingdom? We, too, would be prisoners as Princess Gothlic and Prince Balwone will be. We are their friends, and will miss them deeply'.

'Such I would never permit', said Gothroyd sharply. 'You would raise a conspiracy in no time.'

They shook their heads, pleading with their eyes, but the king was adamant.

Roget came forward to press a last claim. 'Sire, may this old mastiff Morna go with the prince for he is beloved of him?'

The king was gruff. 'Let him follow his master, if he will', he said, 'and as an exception I will allow you to attend Prince Balwone as his squire. More than this I cannot promise'. He spurred his horse to go forward and rejoin the leading officers of his troops.

Before he could speak to them, his way was barred by Gothlic. She showed no affection, nor did she display any hostility. Even so, her face was set and she simply pleaded that the lives of the four attendants who had brought her to Cathrid be spared.

'They came at my command', she said. 'I did not confer with them, nor ask whether or not they wished to attend me. I gave them a royal order which they dared not disobey.'

'They shall not be punished', the king said. 'Let them attend you as you return.'

There was nothing more that either wished to say, and with that the king again moved towards his troops.

After a short discussion, the general called the forces to order and presented arms to the king. For his part, the king spoke to his troops, explaining his decision and commending them for such an easy victory, but all knew his words belied the truth, and as he gave the order for the return to Zed his heart had no joy and his spirit no peace.

As if that were the signal the convocation audience required, the singing broke out afresh, and in it was much praise for the victory Massia had wrought that day, and many new songs were added to the treasury of the singing centuries. It was late in the afternoon when the king closed off the joy with a word of thanksgiving and a prayer of gratitude for the outcome of the day.

Some stayed for the pleasure of continued singing, fellowship and communion and the delight of worship, but others were on their way, especially those who were of the kingdoms of Mantria, Frimpone and Cautria.

CHAPTER THIRTY~THREE

The Banquet of Victory Is Held and the Young Royal Couple Take Themselves Off to Gothric in Zed

IMMEDIATELY following the departure of the army of Zed, the royal family met in the throne room with the Council of Lords, Gothlic and Balwone. Because discussion concerning the coming of Gothroyd had not previously taken place with all the Lords being present, those who were then absent asked whether the whole matter had been planned as it had finally turned out to be on this day.

King Paelfric made no apology. 'One of the duties of a king', he said, 'is to ensure the best for his kingdom. He is a shepherd, so to speak, and he must have the flock in mind. Some of us conferred, for the moment was urgent, when we heard of Gothroyd's intention to invade, and because of the general mind of the kingdom, we decided on the plan you saw come into operation'.

One knight asked, 'Was the action of Gothlic and Balwone part of that plan?'.

'Never', said the King. 'That was of their own volition. I was surprised by the move.'

Another knight added, 'Had they not surrendered themselves to Gothroyd, then I fear he would have let loose his troops upon us. Your Majesty, as you must know, it was the intention of some of us to fight, no matter what decision you had made for us. It was dangerously close to a massacre, and we would have fought such an action'.

'It was close', said Aelfric, 'yet I never thought Gothroyd would have led such a massacre'.

The matter was discussed closely, and the Council meeting came to an end. All seemed to be cheerful, and all commiserated with Gothlic and Balwone, and expressed themselves as grateful for their actions.

Both Gothlic and Balwone kept their peace, not opening their minds to others than the royal couple, Prince Zenli and his wife, Kanavah, Roget and Aelfric.

Knowing the banquet was some hours away, Balwone and Gothlic took themselves to the royal garden and the lake. They knew that apart from the journey back to Gothric they might not see anything of each other in the future. With this in mind, they made use of the few hours before them.

The great dining hall was amply filled with the lords and their ladies, with Gothlic, the three men and Balwone. It may have seemed strange to some that Roget and Aelfric had been asked along with Kanavah of Miridon. Kanavah's being invited they could understand, but the presence of a squire and an erstwhile priest of the ancient gods seemed somewhat difficult to comprehend. Even so, the banquet was a time of pleasure, mixed with some sorrow for the departing members. Both Gothlic and Balwone had, separately, secret thoughts about a wedding banquet that might one day happen. Both were aware this banquet was one arranged and appointed by Massia whose victory of that day had been complete.

Most discussed of all was the subject of the kingdom's powerful change of heart in regard to the Most High and Massia. It seemed that, at core, the people of the kingdom had come to understand Massia as their Lord, and to exchange the old gods for the Most High. No one seemed to be dismayed by the changes. Already there was talk of dismantling the old temples and shrines, and reshaping them for the service of Massia. Few of the aristocracy had belief in any deity or deities and so they were not unduly perturbed by the changes. They imagined they would continue to disbelieve in Massia and the Most High as they had come to disbelieve in other gods and lords. They doubted it.

would greatly change their modes of life, and in this regard they were in for an awakening. The singing and worship seen at the holy convocation was preparing them for this. The witness of the men who had spoken at the convocation was making its impression upon them, though they knew it not.

Following the banquet, the king, queen, Prince Zenli and Princess Clanlo walked with them to the garden. In the quietness and privacy of that place, the royal couples expressed their gratitude to their leaving guests. The excitement and joy of the day was still with them, and they went over and over the happenings from the very dawn until the departure of Gothroyd and his troops.

Having had their fill of conversation, the royal couples took their leave and left the two lovers to their own devices, not that they were at a loss for words and loving attention to each other. It was quite after midnight that they retired to their beds. They had spent part of the evening time in the garden, and, when the night grew cold, part of it in the royal withdrawing room.

They had been confident that the king would not make reprisals with those who had brought the Princess Gothlic to Cathrid. The servants had been commanded, and Gothroyd had assured his daughter that they need not fear that the two men and the two women would come to harm. They, then, would accompany the prince and princess to Zed. Roget and Morna would be companions to Balwone.

It was a large contingent next morning which assembled to bid farewell to Princess Gothlic and Prince Balwone. At first the group was very quiet, scarcely venturing to speak. The king and the queen expressed their gratitude for all that had happened during their stay.

King Paelfric's last words were, 'I am grateful, Prince Balwone, for that wonderful story of the Emperor. It has been repeated now in our day, and Massia has shown himself to be a great Deliverer. Now our kingdom has become his, and doubtless Zed will be one which will not be able to withstand him. His is the way of love, and not of forceful invasion, and he is patient

in his dealings. I fancy Gothroyd wished that the return of the princess and you to Zed had been after another fashion. It is enough that you will be there as Massia's ambassadors. That kingdom, I am sure, will soon fall'.

Balwone said gently that he trusted this might be so. In himself he was not sure, but the golden sword was at his side, and he took heart. He thought, 'Always there is the sword, and nothing can take it away from me and other servants of Lord Massia'.

In the farewelling crowd there were those who favoured Gothroyd and the old deities, and who disliked the changes which were happening in their midst. Even so, they observed protocol, and wished the prince and princess all comfort and blessing. Neither Gothlic nor Balwone was deceived.

The greatest pain of parting was with their two friends, Kanavah and Aelfric. Aelfric had only recently come to have affection for the two departing members of royalty, but his regard for Balwone was high, for he knew this man had saved his life and had brought him to the peace of the Most High. Kanavah promised he would take over Roget's work with the Shemgridions, and that he would act as a shepherd to those who needed his help.

At that point all things were completed. The princess, the prince, the four attendants of Gothlic, and Roget had likewise made their farewell, and now Kanavah showed his determination to make a rich event of the departure.

He turned to the whole contingent and held up his arms as though he were conductor of a large choir. His huge body dominated them wonderfully, and his warm black eyes glowed with soft affection. His hair had again become a thick, black shock and he shook it with vigour. His meaty hands fascinated the watchers and drew from them the desire to express their emotion of parting in sweet music. His mellow baritone voice broke into a song he had once heard from Balwone. The first few bars were

sufficient to catch up the whole group, the king, the queen, Prince Zenli and Princess Clanlo included. So they all sang. They sang until the travellers to Zed were far distant and had indeed rounded a bend in the road and were lost from sight. Still they went on with their singing. Over and over they repeated the words, until they wondered whether they could ever forget such a song.

*Our Most High, he is the Rock,
And never this Rock shall turn to dust.
He is th' Eternal who is love,
And in his righteousness is just.
The hills may fade, the oceans dry,
But he for ever is Most High.*

*Our Most High he is the one,
And ever this one shall holy be,
Till all that's dark and evil dark
Be caused by Massia to flee.
Massia the Servant in his death
Has brought to all the holy Breath.*

*Our Most High he is the Lord,
And ever this Lord shall put to flight
The denizens of darkness grim
Who flee the brilliance of his light.
Massia's sword shall freely move
To show the power of his love.*

*Our Lord Most High he is the rock,
And never this Rock shall turn to dust.
He is the Lord of life and peace,
And in his faithfulness we trust.
As pilgrims now we forward go
With him whose love we see and know.*

The attendants travelled ahead of the royal couple, seeking to allow them to be on their own. Just before they rounded the bend, they both halted their mounts a moment and stared back.

They were not ashamed of their tears, and indeed the tears of both were mingled as they expressed their deep, deep love, and their strong, strong love that young lovers of their ilk have ever known.

The last verse of the song lingered in their minds, and they hummed it together.

*Our Lord Most High he is the rock,
And never this Rock shall turn to dust.
He is the Lord of life and peace,
And in his faithfulness we trust.
As pilgrims now we forward go
With him whose love we see and know.*

Epilogue

THE DAY in the kingdom of Cathrid was a day of gentle warmth. The sky was by nature a royal blue, and the sun laid a golden cover over all things, so that the path on which a posse of stately horses and their comely riders and a dog were traversing was as a golden path. The royal forest, into which they were entering, was also mantled with gold, though the trees sported different greens; greens that were dark as in the oaks and the elms, but others were lighter greens such as poplars. Many were beginning their first autumn tints and spoke of a riot of colours to come. At times the trees almost met overhead, and dappled the riders and the horses with soft sequins, which did not glitter, but lent a transformed colouring to the clothing and the riders.

Around them butterflies of the late autumn lent their last burst of seasonal colour, mainly of golds, but some were crimson and blue or orange, with thick black veins, and blue with similar veins, and these floated above and around the posse. Birds darted across their path or fluttered upwards into the sky. The occasional cry of the kestrel was heard in its short sharp screech, but to counter such cries, and to surmount them with high beauty, were the songs of the skylark as its pinions drew it up into the royal blue of the sky, until bird was lost to sight but song was falling down in liquid notes and a silver sense. It seemed the forest joined to match or support the fugal theme, for other songs did not drown out the silver song, but interlaced themselves with that marvellous melody.

The warmth of the sun was soft, and it caused the seven riders to feel cheerful in their spirits. The group was led by Roget, the dark-bearded, dark-haired squire of Prince Balwone of Manignia, but this prince was a citizen of the world. Riding abreast of him was Gothlic, princess of Zed, returning to her country with her two men and two women who were personal attendants. Both she and Balwone were in disgrace, and were prisoners of her

father, King Gothroyd. The posse was permitted by the king to return without a military escort, and this they were now doing.

The whole group showed no sorrow or fear as they passed beneath the canopy of blue and green. Rather, they were in good spirits and happy humour, and, from time to time, vied with the birds of the woods as they sang songs. At other times they rode in contented silence, and at this moment the princess had opened a conversation with her lover, Balwone.

She had said, 'Balwone, this love of which you speak to people of many nations, what is it? I can understand the warm love we have together, and trust will ever have, but you have had many experiences of love which turned out to be false or less than the love Massia gives to us through his Spirit. So what is this love that makes us one as we knew in the great convocation of yesterday?'

'Ah!' said Balwone. 'How do we describe this love? First we must say that all human creatures have a compulsion to love and to love in sincerity, but because they place the love they have for themselves as first, then all other expressions of love must fit that principle of self-love.'

'When we love, we feel free in ourselves, as this is the way we were created to be and to do. Even so, we can deceive ourselves that this expression of love is not selfish. The test is whether we are first seeking something for ourselves. If this is so, then it is not true love. Often we highly prize a person, an object, or an ambition, and we will give all to this, and it seems our love is of a high nature, but if we do not get good returns for what we give, then we are disappointed, even to anger.'

'Against this, true love asks for no returns, none whatever. It desires the best for the one it loves. It will sacrifice itself even to death. That is what Massia taught us by his own actions.'

As their horses trotted together, Balwone looked over at the princess. 'I say now that I would give all I have and am for you and to you, and believe I am sincere, but time will tell whether my love is true or not. If I make an idol of you, then my love will fail. If I want you for my own use, then I have already failed.'

Gothlic returned his look. 'How, then', she asked, 'can I be sure I love you in this true way? Might my love not also fail?'

Balwone nodded. 'It could', he said, 'though now we both think not. However, we have one assurance our love will never fail, whether towards one another, or others who do not attract or please us. It is this: the Most High himself *is* love. He is not merely one who loves, but he is love itself, love himself. When we love, it will be him in us, loving through us. Our wills will be one with him, and so our loving will be sincere'.

For some time the princess meditated on this. Then she put out a hand towards the prince, and he leaned to take it. It was small and soft and warm in his own hand.

'Then I have nothing to fear', she said.

He agreed, 'Nothing to fear'.

The group of seven proceeded towards the land of Zed. The silence was, in itself, a gift. Their minds drowsed and the sense of goodwill was with them all, in spite of what lay ahead. As they trotted, Balwone laid his reins on the pommel of his saddle. He lifted his arms high and spread them wide.

'All, all!' he cried. 'All is love! The earth and the sea and the sky, the forests and the prairies, the butterflies, the birds and all animals. All humans also, the rich and the poor, the high and the low, and also their places of dwelling, all are of love. The Most High is the pure One. His love is pure. All things are one in that love. How heinous, then, is our evil; when we rebel against that unity, and seek to despoil that love.'

'I say again, all is love, all in which dwells the Most High, all of those who dwell in him. The mystery of unity and the power of love to effect that amity is now partly hidden from us, but he will have all of us to be one in him as he in us. Thus the nations must be gathered into this love, as also be gathered by it.'

'Gothlic, this is our destiny, to bring this love to the nations, and the nations to this love. In the end, in the great climax, all will be love, all will be unity.'

She felt faint with joy as she contemplated this prospect. Then she ventured gently to ask a question.

'What of evil powers and evil people who resist to the last? Will they not prevent this unity coming to pass? What, then, will be their lot?'

Balwone's gaze rested lovingly upon her. 'To resist to the last', he said, 'will be to be immolated in that Divine love, and that will be the deepest agony any can undergo. Nay, nothing can prevent the ultimate climax of love, for the Most High is love. To be outside of love is to be deliberately opposed to him and must carry its own judgment. Love is the Most High in his action for all his creation'.

They rode, coming through an avenue of great oaks, and they were almost in darkness, so deep were the shadows. When they emerged into the full light of the sun, Gothlic said, 'Nothing can be more wonderful than that, just to be in his love, and to be in love'.

They exchanged passionate looks, and then she said, 'Now I fear nothing, Balwone my lord. Such love will keep us ever. So strong it is that it can even win over my father'.

She, too, paused and let her reins drop on to the saddle. She looked at the pure azure of the skies and felt the freshness of the country air. Somewhere in the forest a blackbird sang its pensive song, and above them a skylark sent his melody down to the listeners, and with the giving of it he spiralled even further into the blue.

After a time they both took the reins and drifted along, never catching up with the horses ahead of them. On a sudden impulse, the great white stallion, Ballia, lifted his head and neighed. The beautiful, well-groomed black steed of the princess shook its head and snorted. Then the two settled into the steady rhythm that has always charmed riders.

Had some one been behind them, close enough to watch the royal pair riding, but far enough away from them not to hear the conversation of love, then that spectator would have seen the sky-lark suddenly plunge earthwards to be hidden in grass that grew on the side of the road; would have seen the large butterflies float and drift about the drowsy posse, and might have thought there could be no more beautiful picture to paint.

Surely the people of love were making their journey to a city in which was not much love. A discerning watcher would have known that this is ever the way of love, always moving to where it will transform what is unloving.

The lark flew up again with its incessant song. From the green trees came the companion lyric of the blackbird, and, in the distance, sight of the royal mounts was lost. Even so, all continued to be love.

Glossary

People, Creatures and Places

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| Zed | forest kingdom |
| Balwone | son of Facius and Merphein |
| Facius | knight from Manignia |
| Merphein | wife of Facius; niece of king of Manignia (Zagon) |
| Ballia | Balwone's white horse |
| Roget | Edwin Corsini's hitman who becomes Balwone's companion |
| Shemgridions | race of wise people; people of Massia |
| Gothroyd | king of the kingdom of Zed |
| Massia | Great Prince to come; brings peace; man of love |
| Flamgrid | a man of great wisdom; lives in Gothric; orphaned as a child; also the sage of Zed |
| Zemgrid | foster-father of Flamgrid; cobbler; also orphaned as a child |
| Femgrid | wife of Zemgrid; orphaned as a child; of same travelling tribe as Zemgrid |
| Gothric | ancient city in the kingdom of Zed |
| Gothlic | daughter of Gothroyd |
| Morna | mastiff hound previously belonging to Sophius, now companion to Balwone |
| Cathrid | kingdom east of Zed |
| Manignia | kingdom to the north-east of Cathrid |
| Zagonholme | castle in Manignia where Balwone grew up —just outside of Magnion |
| Shemmosh | Shemgridion met in the forest of Zed |
| Shemmah | Shemgridion, father of Shemmosh |

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| Shemmaker | Shemgridion, grandfather of Shemmosh |
| Shemmshi | Shemgridion, sister of Shemmosh |
| Shemmapath | Shemgridion hiding in the forest of Cathrid |
| Nappali | Shemgridion singer from the East |
| Allein | a jungle–forest on the edge of Miridon |
| Miridon | kingdom bordering Zed |
| Shemmashin | chief elder of the Shemgridions in the Cathrid forest |
| Paelfric | king of Cathrid |
| Zagon | king of Manignia (name given to Manig kings) |
| Endomin | principal city of Cathrid |
| Merom | daughter of Firsini, met in previous journey |
| Firsini | yeoman–farmer |
| Zenli | Paelfric’s son |
| Aelfic Collenthribben | servant of the ancient gods of Cathrid; estranged brother of Paelfric; later saved by, and worshipper of, the Most High |
| Lemery’s Sword | a name for the golden sword given to Balwone in times of great need |
| Shemmashone | Shemgridion sent by Massia to save Aelfric |
| Shemmameem | Shemgridion sent by Massia to save Aelfric |
| Elaina | musical instrument once belonging to Nappali — Balwone named his ‘Fidelia’ |
| Clanlo | Zenli’s wife; daughter of king of Flagland |
| Flagland | kingdom to the south-east of Cathrid |
| Paelmin | Queen of Cathrid |
| Manigs | people of Manignia; a ferocious but cultured people |
| Kanavah | knight from Miridon who had previously been Balwone’s sworn enemy |

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| Edwin Corsini | harsh lord of a serfdom in Flagland |
| Sophius | Shemgridion, son of Pirinus |
| Pirinus | last leader of the Shemgridions of Zed |
| Miridon | kingdom north-east of Zed |
| Mantria | northern-most kingdom |
| Frimpone | kingdom to the north-east of Cathrid |
| Cautria | northern kingdom |
| Shemmalin | leader of the ten Shemgridions who accompanied Balwone to the northern kingdoms |
| Tartarus | miserable final haven of those who do not follow Massia |
| Cotillon | city in the kingdom of Flagland |
| Aethlic | a leader in the army of Zed |
| Shemmanal | Shemgridion who accompanied Balwone |
| Clandius | king of Miridon |
| Mourna the Terrible | ancient god of the sky |
| Clutterers | winged beasts of Allein |
| Sarxia | evil giant of Allein |
| Fransca | ancient god of the hearts of men |
| Spattan | ancient god of life |
| Terebus | ancient god who ruled the night |
| Bekrift | chief city of Mantria |
| Clopelt | king of Mantria |
| Haleen | farmer’s wife from Mantria |
| Frillain | farmer from Mantria |
| Mercia | queen of Mantria |
| Antipal | king of Frimpone |
| Haelfric | king of Cautria |
| Lucifer | the opponent of Massia |
| Antipone | chief city of Frimpone |
| Crimpone | leader of the hill-dwellers of Frimpone |

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| Gerahon | the sage of Frimpone |
| Babylon | great city under which many of Massia's followers lived, having escaped slaughter |
| Meeranol | queen of Frimpone |
| Oranone | chief city of Cautria |
| Holpen | king of Flagland |
| Shemsha | Shemgridion accompanying Balwone |
| Dimion | knight of Manignia |
| Mabila | queen of Manignia |
| Wonan | queen of Miridon |
| Semplin | a knight from Cathrid |