

E. R. EDDISON



***THE WORM
OUROBOROS***

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The Worm Ouroboros

Must Read Classics

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Table of Contents

[The Induction](#)

[The Castle of Lord Juss](#)

[II The Wrastling for Demonland](#)

[III The Red Foliot](#)

[IV Conjuring in the Iron Tower](#)

[V King Gorice's Sending](#)

[VI The Claws of Witchland](#)

[VII Guests of the King in Carcë](#)

[VIII The First Expedition to Impland](#)

[IX Salapanta Hills](#)

[X The Marchlands of the Moruna](#)

[XI The Burg of Eshgrar Ogo](#)

[XII Koshtra Pivrarcha](#)

[XIII Koshtra Belorn](#)

[XIV The Lake of Ravary](#)

[XV Queen Prezmyra](#)

[XVI The Lady Sriva's Embassy](#)

[XVII The King Flies His Haggard](#)

[XVIII The Murther of Gallandus By Corsus](#)

[XIX Thremnir's Heugh](#)

[XX King Corinius](#)

[XXI The Parley Before Krothering](#)

[XXII Aurwath and Switchwater](#)

[XXIII The Weird Begun of Ishnain Nemartra](#)

[XXIV A King in Krothering](#)

[XXV Lord Gro and the Lady Mevrian](#)

[XXVI The Battle of Krothering Side](#)

[XXVII The Second Expedition to Impland](#)

[XXVIII Zora Rach Nam Psarrion](#)

[XXIX The Fleet at Muelva](#)

[XXX Tidings of Melikaphkhaz](#)

[XXXI The Demons Before Carcë](#)

XXXII The Latter End of All the Lords of Witchland
XXXIII Queen Sophonisba in Galing
Argument: with Dates

To W. G. E. *and to my friends* K. H. *and* G. C. L. M. *I dedicate this book*

It is neither allegory nor fable but a Story to be read for its own sake.

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

E. R. E.

9th January 1922

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

“Betide me weal, betide me woe,
That weird shall never daunt me.”
Syne he has kissed her rosy lips,
All underneath the Eildon Tree.

* * * * *

THOMAS THE RHYMER.

The Induction

[Table of Contents](#)

There was a man named Lessingham dwelt in an old low house in Wastdale, set in a gray old garden where yew-trees flourished that had seen Vikings in Copeland in their seedling time. Lily and rose and larkspur bloomed in the borders, and begonias with blossoms big as saucers, red and white and pink and lemon-colour, in the beds before the porch. Climbing roses, honeysuckle, clematis, and the scarlet flame-flower scrambled up the walls. Thick woods were on every side without the garden, with a gap north-eastward opening on the desolate lake and the great fells beyond it: Gable rearing his crag-bound head against the sky from behind the straight clean outline of the Screes.

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

“Should we finish that chapter of Njal?” she said.

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

Here I ride swift steed,
His flank flecked with rime,
Rain from his mane drips,
Horse mighty for harm;
Flames flare at each end,
Gall glows in the midst,
So fares it with Flosi’s redes
As this flaming brand flies;
And so fares it with Flosi’s redes
As this flaming brand flies.

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

“After that he went to his bed, and was senseless for a long time, but at last he came to himself. He bore in mind all that had happened, and told his father, but he bade him tell it to Hjalldi Skeggi’s son. So he went and told Hjalldi, but he

said he had seen 'the Wolf's Ride, and that comes ever before great tidings.'"

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

"What, in the Lotus Room?"

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

A little later, standing on the open hillside below the hawking bats, they watched for the dim planet that showed

at last low down in the west between the sunset and the dark.

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

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

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

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

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

That night Lessingham lay alone in the Lotus Room. Its casements opened eastward on the sleeping woods and the sleeping bare slopes of Illgill Head. He slept soft and deep; for that was the House of Postmeridian, and the House of Peace.

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

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

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

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

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

The Castle of Lord Juss

[Table of Contents](#)

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

The eastern stars were paling to the dawn as Lessingham followed his conductor along the grass walk between the shadowy ranks of Irish yews, that stood like soldiers mysterious and expectant in the darkness. The grass was bathed in night-dew, and great white lilies sleeping in the shadows of the yews loaded the air of that garden with fragrance. Lessingham felt no touch of the ground beneath his feet, and when he stretched out his hand to touch a tree his hand passed through branch and leaves as though they were unsubstantial as a moonbeam.

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

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

here impalpable and invisible, as it were two dreams walking.”

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

She spoke, and the first low beams of the sun smote javelin-like through the eastern windows, and the freshness of morning breathed and shimmered in that lofty chamber, chasing the blue and dusky shades of departed night to the corners and recesses, and to the rafters of the vaulted roof. Surely no potentate of earth, not Croesus, not the great King, not Minos in his royal palace in Crete, not all the Pharaohs, not Queen Semiramis, nor all the Kings of Babylon and Nineveh had ever a throne room to compare in glory with that high presence chamber of the lords of Demonland. Its walls and pillars were of snow-white marble,

every vein whereof was set with small gems: rubies, corals, garnets, and pink topaz. Seven pillars on either side bore up the shadowy vault of the roof; the roof-tree and the beams were of gold, curiously carved, the roof itself of mother-of-pearl. A side aisle ran behind each row of pillars, and seven paintings on the western side faced seven spacious windows on the east. At the end of the hall upon a dais stood three high seats, the arms of each composed of two hippogriffs wrought in gold, with wings spread, and the legs of the seats the legs of the hippogriffs; but the body of each high seat was a single jewel of monstrous size: the left-hand seat a black opal, asparkle with steel-blue fire, the next a fire-opal, as it were a burning coal, the third seat an alexandrite, purple like wine by night but deep sea-green by day. Ten more pillars stood in semicircle behind the high seats, bearing up above them and the dais a canopy of gold. The benches that ran from end to end of the lofty chamber were of cedar, inlaid with coral and ivory, and so were the tables that stood before the benches. The floor of the chamber was tessellated, of marble and green tourmaline, and on every square of tourmaline was carven the image of a fish: as the dolphin, the conger, the cat-fish, the salmon, the tunny, the squid, and other wonders of the deep. Hangings of tapestry were behind the high seats, worked with flowers, snake's-head, snapdragon, dragon-mouth, and their kind; and on the dado below the windows were sculptures of birds and beasts and creeping things.

But a great wonder of this chamber, and a marvel to behold, was how the capital of every one of the four-and-twenty pillars was hewn from a single precious stone,

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

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

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

to fill with guests. A joy it was to see such a shifting maze of velvets, furs, curious needleworks and cloth of tissue, tiffanies, laces, ruffs, goodly chains and carcanets of gold: such glitter of jewels and weapons: such nodding of the plumes the Demons wore in their hair, half veiling the horns that grew upon their heads. Some were sitting on the benches or leaning on the polished tables, some walking forth and back upon the shining floor. Here and there were women among them, women so fair one had said: it is surely white-armed Helen this one; this, Arcadian Atalanta; this, Phryne that stood to Praxiteles for Aphrodite's picture; this, Thaïs, for whom great Alexander to pleasure her fantasy did burn Persepolis like a candle; this, she that was rapt by the Dark God from the flowering fields of Enna, to be Queen for ever among the dead that be departed.

Now came a stir near the stately doorway, and Lessingham beheld a Demon of burly frame and noble port, richly attired. His face was ruddy and somewhat freckled, his forehead wide, his eyes calm and blue like the sea. His beard, thick and tawny, was parted and brushed back and upwards on either side.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Volle threw up his beard and laughed a great laugh at some jest that Zigg whispered in his ear, and Lessingham leaned forward into the hall if haply he might catch what was said. The hum of talk drowned the words, but leaning forward Lessingham saw where the arras curtains behind the dais parted for a moment, and one of princely bearing advanced past the high seats down the body of the hall. His gait was delicate, as of some lithe beast of prey newly wakened out of slumber, and he greeted with lazy grace the many friends who hailed his entrance. Very tall was that lord, and slender of build, like a girl. His tunic was of silk coloured like the wild rose, and embroidered in gold with

representations of flowers and thunderbolts. Jewels glittered on his left hand and on the golden bracelets on his arms, and on the fillet twined among the golden curls of his hair, set with plumes of the king-bird of Paradise. His horns were dyed with saffron, and inlaid with filigree work of gold. His buskins were laced with gold, and from his belt hung a sword, narrow of blade and keen, the hilt rough with beryls and black diamonds. Strangely light and delicate was his frame and seeming, yet with a sense of slumbering power beneath, as the delicate peak of a snow mountain seen afar in the low red rays of morning. His face was beautiful to look upon, and softly coloured like a girl's face, and his expression one of gentle melancholy, mixed with some disdain; but fiery glints awoke at intervals in his eyes, and the lines of swift determination hovered round the mouth below his curled moustachios.

“At last,” murmured Lessingham, “at last, Lord Juss!”

“Little art thou to blame,” said the martlet, “for this misprision, for scarce could a lordlier sight have joyed thine eyes. Yet is this not Juss, but Lord Brandoch Daha, to whom all Demonland west of Shalgreth and Stropardon oweth allegiance: the rich vineyards of Krothering, the broad pasture lands of Failze, and all the western islands and their cragbound fastnesses. Think not, because he affecteth silks and jewels like a queen, and carrieth himself light and dainty as a silver birch tree on the mountain, that his hand is light or his courage doubtful in war. For years was he held for the third best man-at-arms in all Mercury, along with these, Goldry Bluszco and Gorice X. of Witchland. And Gorice he slew, nine summers back, in single combat, when

the Witches harried in Goblinland and Brandoch Daha led five hundred and fourscore Demons to succour Gaslark, the king of that country. And now can none surpass Lord Brandoch Daha in feats of arms, save perchance Goldry alone.

“Yet, lo,” she said, as a sweet and wild music stole on the ear, and the guests turned towards the dais, and the hangings parted, “at last, the triple lordship of Demonland! Strike softly, music: smile, Fates, on this festal day! Joy and safe days shine for this world and Demonland! Turn thy gaze first on him who walks in majesty in the midst, his tunic of olive-green velvet ornamented with devices of hidden meaning in thread of gold and beads of chrysolite. Mark how the buskins, clasping his stalwart calves, glitter with gold and amber. Mark the dusky cloak streamed with gold and lined with blood-red silk: a charmed cloak, made by the sylphs in forgotten days, bringing good hap to the wearer, so he be true of heart and no dastard. Mark him that weareth it, his sweet dark countenance, the violet fire in his eyes, the sombre warmth of his smile, like autumn woods in late sunshine. This is Lord Juss, lord of this age-remembering castle, than whom none hath more worship in wide Demonland. Somewhat he knoweth of art magical, yet useth not that art; for it sappeth the life and strength, nor is it held worthy that a Demon should put trust in that art, but rather in his own might and main.

“Now turn thine eyes to him that leaneth on Juss’s left arm, shorter but mayhap sturdier than he, apparelled in black silk that shimmers with gold as he moveth, and crowned with black eagle’s feathers among his horns and

yellow hair. His face is wild and keen like a sea-eagle's, and from his bristling brows the eyes dart glances sharp as a glancing spear. A faint flame, pallid like the fire of a Will-o'-the-Wisp, breathes ever and anon from his distended nostrils. This is Lord Spitfire, impetuous in war.

“Last, behold on Juss's right hand, yon lord that bulks mighty as Hercules yet steppeth lightly as a heifer. The thews and sinews of his great limbs ripple as he moves beneath a skin whiter than ivory; his cloak of cloth of gold is heavy with jewels, his tunic of black sendaline hath great hearts worked thereon in rubies and red silk thread. Slung from his shoulders clanks a two-handed sword, the pommel a huge star-ruby carven in the image of a heart, for the heart is his sign and symbol. This is that sword forged by the elves, wherewith he slew the sea-monster, as thou mayest see in the painting on the wall. Noble is he of countenance, most like to his brother Juss, but darker brown of hair and ruddier of hue and bigger of cheekbone. Look well on him, for never shall thine eyes behold a greater champion than the Lord Goldry Bluszco, captain of the hosts of Demonland.”

Now when the greetings were done and the strains of the lutes and recorders sighed and lost themselves in the shadowy vault of the roof, the cup-bearers did fill great gems made in form of cups with ancient wine, and the Demons caroused to Lord Juss deep draughts in honour of this day of his nativity. And now they were ready to set forth by twos and threes into the parks and pleasaunces, some to take their pleasure about the fair gardens and fishponds, some to hunt wild game among the wooded hills, some to

disport themselves at quoits or tennis or riding at the ring or martial exercises; that so they might spend the livelong day as befitteth high holiday, in pleasure and action without care, and thereafter revel in the lofty presence chamber till night grew old with eating and drinking and all delight.

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

“What kill-joy have we here?” said Spitfire. “The trumpet soundeth only for travellers from the outlands. I feel it in my bones some rascal is come to Galing, one that bringeth ill hap in his pocket and a shadow athwart the sun on this our day of festival.”

“Speak no word of ill omen,” answered Juss. “Whosoe’er it be, we will straight dispatch his business and so fall to pleasure indeed. Some, run to the gate and bring him in.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I like not the dirty face of the Ambassador,” said Lord Zigg. “His nose sitteth flat on the face of him as it were a dab of clay, and I can see pat up his nostrils a summer day’s journey into his head. If’s upper lip bespeak him not a rare spouter of rank fustian, perdition catch me. Were it a finger’s breadth longer, a might tuck it into his collar to keep his chin warm of a winter’s night.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So spake Lord Brandoch Daha, in lazy half-mocking tone, as one who but idly returneth the ball of conversation; yet clearly, so that all might hear. And therewith the murmurs died down, and Spitfire said, “I am tame. Say thine errand

freely, and imagine not that we shall hold thee answerable for aught thou sayest, but him that sent thee.”

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

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

“Thou hast delivered all?” said Juss.

“All,” answered the Ambassador.

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

Then said Lord Spitfire, “No marvel though the spawn of Witchland fear venom in the cup. They who work commonly such villany against their enemies, as witness Recedor of Goblinland whom Corsus murdered with a poisonous

draught, shake still in the knees lest themselves be so entertained to their destruction;" and snatching the cup he quaffed it to the dregs, and dashed it on the marble floor before the Ambassador, so that it was shivered into pieces.

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

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

Lord Juss smiled somewhat scornfully. "With wisdom," he said, "and with foresight hath Witchland made choice of his time to move against us, knowing that thirty and three of our well-built ships are sunken in Kartadza Sound in the battle with the Ghouls, and but fourteen remain to us. Now that the Ghouls are slain, every soul, and utterly abolished from this world, and so the great curse and peril of all this world ended by the sword and great valour of Demonland alone, now seemeth the happy moment unto these late mouth-friends to fall upon us. For have not the Witches a strong fleet of ships, since their whole fleet fled at the beginning of their fight with us against the Ghouls, leaving us to bear the burden? And now are they minded for this new treason, to set upon us traitorously and suddenly in this disadvantage. For the King well judgeth we can carry no

army to Witchland nor do aught in his despite, but must be long months a-shipbuilding. And doubt not he holdeth an armament ready aboard at Tenemos to sail hither if he get the answer he knoweth we shall send him."

"Sit we at ease then," said Goldry, "sharpening our swords; and let him ship his armies across the salt sea. Not a Witch shall land in Demonland but shall leave here his blood and bones to make fat our cornfields and our vineyards."

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

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

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

and wofully he pineth for the hundredth. He shall wrastle a fall with me!”

Now this seemed good to them all. So when they had talked on it awhile and concluded what they would do, glad of heart the lords of Demonland turned them back to the lofty presence chamber. And there Lord Juss spake and said: “Demons, ye have heard the words which the King of Witchland in the overweening pride and shamelessness of his heart hath spoken unto us by the mouth of this Ambassador. Now this is our answer which my brother shall give, the Lord Goldry Bluszco; and we charge thee, O Ambassador, to deliver it truly, neither adding any word nor taking away.”

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

you of Witchland in peace, and ye them, and the Witches shall forswear for ever their impudent claims on Demonland. But if thou, Gorice, win the day, then hast thou the glory of that victory, and withal full liberty to thrust thy claims upon us with the sword.”

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

The Ambassador took it and made haste to depart; but when he was come to the stately doorway of the presence chamber, being near the door and amongst his attendants, and away from the lords of Demonland, he plucked up heart a little and turned and said: “Rashly and to thy certain undoing, O Goldry Bluszco, hast thou bidden our Lord the King to contend with thee in wrastling. For be thou never so mighty of limb, yet hath he overthrown as mighty. And he wrastleth not for sport, but will surely work thy life’s decay, and keep the dead bones of thee with the bones of the ninety and nine champions whom he hath heretofore laid low in that exercise.”

Therewith, because Goldry and the other lords scowled upon him terribly, and the guests near the door fell to hooting and reviling of the Witches, the Ambassador went forth hastily and hastily down the shining stairs and across the court, as one who fleeth along a lane on a dark and