Chapter I

1

Visbhume, apprentice to the recently dead Hippolito, applied to the sorcerer Tamurello for a similar post, but was denied. Visbhume then offered for sale a box containing articles which he had carried away from Hippolito's house. Tamurello, glancing into the box, saw enough to warrant his interest and paid over Visbhume's price.

Among the objects in the box were fragments of an old manuscript. When news of the transaction came by chance to the ears of the witch Desmëi, she wondered if the fragments might not fill out the gaps in a manuscript which she had long been trying to restore. Without delay she took herself to Tamurello's manse Faroli in the Forest of Tantrevalles, and there applied for permission to inspect the fragments.

With all courtesy Tamurello displayed the fragments. "Are these the missing pieces?"

Desmëi looked through the fragments. "They are indeed!"

"In that case they are now yours," said Tamurello. "Accept them with my compliments."

"I will do so most gratefully!" said Desmëi. As she packed the fragments into a portfolio, she studied Tamurello from the corner of her eye. She said: "It is somewhat odd that we have not met before."

Tamurello smilingly agreed. "The world is long and wide. New experiences await us always, for the most part to our

pleasure." He inclined his head with unmistakable gallantry toward his guest.

"Nicely spoken, Tamurello!" said Desmëi. "Truly, you are most gracious!"

"Only when circumstances warrant. Will you take refreshment? Here is a soft wine pressed from the Alhadra grape."

For a time the two sat discussing themselves and their concepts. Desmëi, finding Tamurello both stimulating and large with vitality, decided to take him for her lover.

Tamurello, who was keen for novelty, made no difficulties and matched her energy with his own, and for a season all was well. However, in due course Tamurello came to feel that Desmëi, to an enervating degree, lacked both lightness and grace. He began to blow hot and cold, to Desmëi's deep concern. At first she chose to interpret his waning ardour as a lover's teasing: the naughtiness, so to speak, of a pampered darling. She thrust herself upon his attention, tempting him with first one coy trick, then another.

Tamurello became ever more unresponsive. Desmëi sat long hours with him, analyzing their relationship in all its phases, while Tamurello drank wine and looked moodily off through the trees.

Neither sighs nor sentiment, Desmëi discovered, affected Tamurello. She learned that he was equally proof against cajolery, while reproaches seemed only to bore him. At last, in a facetious manner, Desmëi spoke of a former lover who had caused her pain and hinted of the misfortunes which thereafter had dogged his life. Finally she saw that she had captured Tamurello's attention, and veered to more cheerful topics.

Tamurello let prudence guide his conduct, and once again Desmëi had no complaints.

After a hectic month Tamurello found that he could no longer maintain his glassy-eyed zest. Once again he began to avoid Desmëi, but now that she understood the forces which guided his conduct, she brought him smartly to heel.

Desperate at last, Tamurello invoked a spell of ennui upon Desmëi: an influence so quiet, gradual and unobtrusive that she never noticed its coming. She grew weary of the world, its sordid vanities, futile ambitions and pointless pleasures, but so strong was her disposition that she never thought to suspect a change in herself. From Tamurello's point of view, the spell was a success.

For a period Desmëi moved in gloomy contemplation through the windy halls of her palace on the beach near Ys, then at last decided to abandon the world to its own melancholy devices. She made herself ready for death, and from her terrace watched the sun set for the last time.

At midnight she sent a bubble of significance over the mountains to Faroli, but when dawn arrived, no message had returned.

Desmëi pondered a long hour, and at last thought to wonder at the dejection which had brought her to such straits.

Her decision was irrevocable. In her final hour, however, she bestirred herself to work a set of wonderful formulations, the like of which had never been known before.

The motives for these final acts were then and thereafter beyond calculation, for her thinking had become vague and eerie. She surely felt betrayal and rancor, and no doubt a measure of spite, and seemed also urged by forces of sheer creativity. In any event she produced a pair of superlative objects, which perhaps she hoped might be accepted as the projection of her own ideal self, and that the beauty of

these objects and their symbolism might be impinged upon Tamurello.

In the light of further circumstances* her success in this regard was flawed, and the triumph, if the word could so be used, went rather to Tamurello.

In achieving her aims, Desmëi used a variety of stuff: salt from the sea, soil from the summit of Mount Khambaste in Ethiopia, exudations and pastes, as well as elements of her personal substance. So she created a pair of wonderful beings: exemplars of all the graces and beauties. The woman was Melancthe; the man was Faude Carfilhiot.

Still all was not done. As the two stood naked and mindless in the workroom, the dross remaining in the vat yielded a rank green vapor. After a startled breath, Melancthe shrank back and spat the taste from her mouth. Carfilhiot, however, found the reek to his liking and inhaled it with all avidity.

Some years later, the castle Tintzin Fyral fell to the armies of Troicinet. Carfilhiot was captured and hanged from a grotesquely high gibbet, in order to send an unmistakably significant image toward both Tamurello at Faroli to the east and to King Casmir of Lyonesse, to the south.

In due course Carfilhiot's corpse was lowered to the ground, placed on a pyre, and burned to the music of bagpipes and flutes. In the midst of the rejoicing the flames gave off a gout of foul green vapor, which, caught by the wind, blew out over the sea. Swirling low and mingling with spume from the waves, the fume condensed to become a green pearl which sank to the ocean floor, where eventually it was ingested by a large flounder.

* The details are chronicled in *Lyonesse I: Suldrun's Garden.*

2

South Ulfland faced on the sea from Ys in the south to Suarach in the north: a succession of shingle beaches and rocky headlands along a coast for the most part barren and bleak. The three best harbors were at Ys and Suarach and at Oäldes, between the two. Elsewhere harbors, good or bad, were infrequent, and often no more than coves enclosed by the hook of a headland.

Twenty miles south of Oäldes, a line of crags entered the ocean and with the help of a stone breakwater, gave shelter to several dozen fishing boats. Around the harbor huddled the village Mynault: a clutch of narrow stone houses, two taverns and a market-place.

In one of the houses lived the fisherman Sarles, a man black-haired and stocky, with heavy hips and a small round paunch. His face, which was round, pale and moony, showed a constant frown of puzzlement, as if he found life and logic always at odds.

The bloom of Sarles' youth was gone forever, but Sarles had little to show for his years of more or less diligent toil. Sarles blamed bad luck, although if his spouse Liba were to be believed, indolence was by far the larger factor.

Sarles kept his boat the *Preval* drawn up on the shingle directly in front of his house, which made for convenience. He had inherited the *Preval* from his father, and the craft was now old and worn, with every seam leaking and every joint working. Sarles well knew the deficiencies of the *Preval* and sailed it out upon the sea only when the weather was fine.

Liba, like Sarles, was somewhat portly. Though older than Sarles, she commanded far more energy and often asked him:

"Why are you not out fishing today, like the other men?"

Sarles' reply might be: "The wind is sure to pipe up later this afternoon; the dead-eyes on the port shrouds simply cannot take so much strain."

"Then why not replace the dead-eyes? You have nothing better to do."

"Bah, woman, you understand nothing of boats. The weakest part always breaks first. If I fixed the dead-eyes, then the shrouds might part, or a real blow might push the mast-step right through the bottom of the boat."

"In that case, replace the shrouds, then repair the strakes."

"Easier said than done! It would be a waste of time and I would be throwing good money after bad."

"But you waste much time at the tavern where you also throw away good money, and by the handfuls."

"Woman, enough! Would you deny me my single relaxation?"

"Indeed I would! Everyone else is out on the water while you sit in the sun catching flies. Your cousin Junt left the harbor before dawn to make sure of his mackerel! Why did you not do the same?"

"Junt does not suffer miseries of the back as I do," muttered Sarles. "Also he sails the *Lirlou*, which is a fine new boat."

"It is the fisherman who catches fish, not the boat. Junt brings in six times the catch you do."

"Only because his son Tamas fishes beside him."

"Which means that each out-fishes you three times over."

Sarles cried out in anger: "Woman, when will you learn to curb your tongue? I would be off to the tavern this instant had I one coin to rub against another."

"Why not use the leisure to repair the *Preval*?"

Sarles threw his hands in the air and went down to the beach where he assessed the deficiencies of his craft. With nothing better to do, he carved a new dead-eye for his shrouds. Cordage was too dear for his pocket, so he performed a set of make-shift splices, which strengthened the shrouds but made an unsightly display.

And so it went. Sarles gave the *Preval* only what maintenance was needed to keep it afloat, and sallied out among the reefs and rocks only when conditions were optimum, which was not often.

One day even Sarles became alarmed. With a soft breeze blowing on-shore, he rowed from the harbor, hoisted his sprit-sail, set up the back-stay, adjusted the sheets and bowled nicely across the swells and out toward the reefs, where the fish were most plentiful . . . Peculiar! thought Sarles. Why did his back-stay sag when he had only just set it up taut? Making an investigation, he discovered a daunting fact: the stern-post to which the stay was attached had become so rotten from age and attacks of the worm that it was about to break loose to the tension of the back-stay, thereby causing a great disaster.

Sarles rolled up his eyes and gritted his teeth in annoyance. Now, without fail or delay, he must make a whole set of tedious repairs, and he could expect neither leisure nor wine-bibbing until the repairs were done. To finance the repairs he might even be forced to beg a place aboard the *Lirlou*, which again was most tiresome, since it meant that he would be forced to work Junt's hours.

For the nonce, he shifted the back-stay to one of the stern-cleats, which, in mild weather such as that of today, would suffice.

Sarles fished for two hours, during which time he caught a single flounder. When he cleaned the fish, its belly fell open and out rolled a magnificent green pearl, of a quality far beyond Sarles' experience. Marvelling at his good fortune, he again threw out his lines but now the breeze began to freshen, and concerned with the state of his make-shift back-stay, Sarles hoisted anchor, raised his sail and turned his bow toward Mynault, and as he sailed he gloated upon the beautiful green pearl, the very touch of which sent shivers of delight along his nerves.

Once more in the harbor, Sarles beached his boat and set out for home, only to meet his cousin Junt.

"What?" cried Junt. "Back so soon from your work? It is not yet noon! What have you caught? A single flounder? Sarles, you will die in penury if you do not take yourself in hand! Truly you should give the *Preval* a good work-over and then fish with zeal, so that you may do something for yourself and your old age."

Nettled by the criticism, Sarles retorted: "What of you? Why are you not out in your fine *Lirlou*? Do you fear a bit of wind?"

"Not at all! I would fish and gladly, wind or no wind, but for caulking and fresh pitch done to *Lirlou's* seams."

As a rule Sarles was neither clever, spiteful, nor mischievous, his worst vice being sloth and a surly obstinacy in the face of chiding from his spouse. But now, impelled by a sudden tingle of crafty malice, he said: "Well then, if zeal rives you so urgently, there is the *Preval*; sail out to the reef and fish until you have had enough."

Junt gave a derisive grunt. "It is a sad comedown for me after working my fine *Lirlou*! Still, I believe that I will take you

at your word. It is odd, but I cannot sleep well unless I have rousted up a good catch of fish from the deep."

"I wish you good luck," said Sarles and continued along the jetty. The wind, so he noted, had shifted and now blew from the north.

At the market Sarles sold his flounder for a decent price, then paused to reflect. He pulled the pearl from his pocket and considered it anew: a beautiful thing, though the green luster was unusual and even—it must be admitted—a trifle unsettling.

Sarles grinned a curious mindless grin and tucked the pearl back into his pocket. He marched across the square to the tavern, where he poured a good half-pint of wine down his throat. The first called for another, and as Sarles started on his second half-pint he was accosted by one of his cronies, a certain Juliam, who asked: "How goes the world? No fishing today?"

"I am not up to it today, owing to my sore back. Also, Junt decided that he wished to borrow *Preval* and I told him 'Go to it; fish all night, if you are so frantic in your zeal!' So off went Junt in my good old *Preval*."

"Ah well, that was generous of you!"

"Why not? After all, he is my cousin and blood is thicker than water."

"True."

Sarles finished his wine and strolled out to the end of the jetty. He scanned the sea with care but neither to the north, the west, nor the south could he glimpse the patched yellow sail of the *Preval*.

He turned away and went back along the jetty. Down on the shingle other fishermen were beaching their boats. Sarles

went down and made inquiries in regard to Junt. "From the kindness of my heart I let him take out my *Preval*, though I warned him that the wind was rising and seemed to be veering to the north."

"He was out by Scratch Bottom an hour ago," said one of the fishermen. "Junt will fish while honest men drink wine!"

Sarles scanned the sea. "Possibly true, but I do not see him now. The wind is swinging about and he will be in trouble if he does not head for the harbor soon."

"Never fear for an old sea-dog like Junt, in a stout boat such as the *Lirlou*," said a fisherman who had just come up.

The first fisherman gave a raucous laugh. "But he is aboard the *Preval*!"

"Aha. That is something else again. Sarles, you would be wise to make repairs."

"Yes, yes," muttered Sarles. "In due course. I can neither walk on water nor blow gold coins out of my nose."

Sunset came and still Junt failed to return to Mynault harbor. Sarles finally reported the circumstances to Liba. "Today my back was poorly, and I could not fish over-long. From motives of generosity I allowed Junt the use of my boat. He has not yet returned and I fear that he has been blown off down the coast, or even has wrecked the *Preval*. I suppose this should be a lesson for me."

Liba stared. "For you? What of Junt and his family?"

"I am concerned on both counts. That goes without saying. However, I have not told you yet of my amazing good luck."

"Indeed? Your back is well so that finally you can work? Or you have lost your taste for wine?"

"Woman, control your tongue or you will feel the weight of my hand! I am bored with acrid jokes."

"Well then, what is your luck?"

Sarles displayed the pearl. "What do you think of that?"

Liba looked down at the gem. "Hmm. Curious. I have never heard of a green pearl. Are you sure it is genuine?"

"Of course! Do you take me for a fool? It is worth a goodly sum."

Liba turned away. "It gives me the chills."

"Is not that just like a woman? Where is my supper? What! Gruel? Why cannot you cook a tasty pot of soup, like other women?"

"I should work miracles, when the cupboard is bare? If you caught more fish and drank less wine we would eat better."

"Bah! From now on all will be different."

During the night Sarles was troubled by unsettling dreams. Faces peered at him through swirls of mist, then spoke gravely aside to each other. Try as he might he could understand none of the comments. A few of the faces seemed familiar, but Sarles could put no names to them.

In the morning Junt still had not returned in the *Preval*. By virtue of established custom, Sarles therefore became privileged to fish from the fine new *Lirlou*. Tamas, Junt's son, wished also to go out aboard the *Lirlou* but this Sarles would not allow. "I prefer to fish by myself."

Tamas made a hot protest. "That is not reasonable! I must protect my family's interests!"

Sarles raised his finger high. "Not so fast! Are you forgetting that I also have interests? The *Lirlou* becomes my own until Junt returns me my *Preval* safe and sound. If you want to fish, you must make other arrangements."

Sarles sailed the *Lirlou* out to the fishing grounds, rejoicing in the strength of the craft and the convenience of the gear.

Today his luck was unusually good; fish fairly seized at his lines and the baskets in the hold became filled to the brim, and Sarles sailed back to Mynault congratulating himself. Tonight he would eat good soup or even a roast fowl.

Two months passed, during which Sarles profited from fine catches, while nothing seemed to go right for Tamas. One evening Tamas went to the house of Sarles, hoping to make some sort of adjustment in a situation which no one in Mynault considered totally fair, though all agreed that Sarles had acted only within his rights.

Tamas found Liba alone, sitting by the hearth spinning thread. Tamas came to the middle of the room and looked all around. "Where is Sarles?"

"At the tavern, or so I would expect, pouring his gut full of wine." Liba spoke in a flat voice which held a metallic overtone. She glanced at Tamas over her shoulder, then returned to her spindle. "Whatever you want you will not get. He is suddenly a man of property, and struts around like a grandee."

"Still, we must have an understanding!" declared Tamas. "He lost his rotten hulk and gained the *Lirlou*, at the expense of myself, my mother and my sisters. We have lost everything through no fault of our own. We ask only that Sarles deal fairly with us, and give us our share."

Liba moved her shoulders in a stony shrug. "It is useless to talk to me. I can do nothing with him. He is a different man since he brought home his green pearl." She raised her eyes to the mantel, where the pearl rested in a saucer.

Tamas went to look at the gem. He took it up and hefted it in his fingers, then whistled through his teeth. "This is a valuable object! It would buy another *Lirlou*! It would make me rich!"

Liba glanced at him in surprise. Was this the voice of Tamas, everywhere considered the very soul of rectitude? The green pearl seemed to corrupt with greed and selfishness all those who touched it! She turned back to her spinning. "Tell me nothing; what I do not know I can not prevent. I abhor the thing; it gazes at me like an evil eye."

Tamas uttered a queer high-pitched chuckle: so odd that Liba glanced at him sidelong in surprise.

"Just so!" said Tamas. "It is a time for a righting of wrongs! If Sarles complains, let him come to me!" With the pearl in his hand, he ran from the house. Liba sighed and returned to her spinning, with a heavy lump of apprehension in her chest.

An hour passed with no sound but the sough of the wind in the chimney and an occasional sputter of the fire. Then came the lurching thud of Sarles' steps as he staggered home from the tavern. He thrust the door wide, stood a moment in the opening, his face round as a plate under the untidy ledges of his black hair. His eyes darted here and there and halted on the saucer; he went to look and found the saucer empty. He uttered a cry of anguish. "Where is the pearl, the lovely green pearl?"

Liba spoke in her even voice. "Tamas came to talk with you. Since you were not here he took the pearl."

Sarles gave a howl of rage. "Why did you not stop him?"

"It is none of my affair. You must settle the matter with Tamas."

Sarles moaned in fury. "You could have stayed him; you gave him the pearl!" He lurched at her with clubbed fists; she raised the spindle and thrust it into his left eye.

Sarles clapped his hand to the bloody socket, while Liba

stood back, awed by the magnitude of her deed.

Sarles looked at her with his right eye, and stepped slowly forward. Liba, groping behind her, found a broom of tied withes which she lifted and held ready. Sarles came forward one step at a time. Never taking his eye from Liba, he bent and picked up a short-handled axe. Liba screamed and thrust the broom into Sarles' face, then ran for the door. Sarles seized her hair and, pulling her back, did gruesome work with the axe.

Neighbors had been attracted by the screams. Men seized Sarles and took him to the square. The town elders were summoned from their beds and came blinking out to do justice by the light of lanterns.

The crime was manifest; the murderer was known, and there was nothing to be gained by delay. Sentence was passed; Sarles was marched to the hostler's barn and hanged from the hay derrick, while the village population stared in wonder to see their neighbor kick and jerk by lantern light.

3

Oäldes, twenty miles north of Mynault, had long served the South Ulfish kings as their seat, though it lacked the grace and historical presence of Ys, and showed to poor advantage when compared to Avallon and Lyonesse Town. To Tamas, however, Oäldes with its market square and busy harbor seemed the very definition of urbanity.

He stabled his horse and made a breakfast of fish stew at a dockside tavern, all the while wondering where best to sell his wonderful pearl, that he might realize a maximum gain.

Tamas made a guarded inquiry of the landlord: "I put you this question: if someone wished to sell a pearl of value, where would he find the best price?"

"Pearls, eh? You will find small clamor for pearls at Oäldes. Here we spend our miserable few coins on bread and codfish. An onion in the stew is all the pearl most of us will ever see. Still, show me your wares."

Somewhat reluctantly Tamas allowed the landlord a glimpse of the green pearl.

"A prodigy!" declared the landlord. "Or is it a cunning puddle of green glass?"

"It is a pearl," said Tamas shortly.

"Perhaps so. I have seen a pink pearl from Hadramaut, and a white pearl from India, both adorning the ears of sea-captains. Let me look once more on your green jewel . . . Ah! It glows with a virulent light! There, yonder, is the booth of a Sephard goldsmith; perhaps he will offer you a price."

Tamas took the pearl to the goldsmith's booth and laid it upon the counter. "How much gold and how much silver will you pay out for this fine gem?"

The goldsmith pushed a long nose close to the pearl and rolled it with a bronze pick. He looked up. "What is your price?"

Tamas, ordinarily equable, found himself infuriated by the goldsmith's bland voice. He responded roughly: "I want the full value, and I will not be cheated!"

The goldsmith shrugged narrow shoulders. "The worth of an article is what someone will pay. I have no market for such a fine trinket. I will give a single gold piece, no more."

Tamas snatched the pearl and strode angrily away. And so it went all day. Tamas offered the pearl to every one whom he

thought might pay a good price, but met no success.

Late in the afternoon, tired, hungry and seething with repressed anger, he returned to the Red Lobster Inn, where he ate a pork pasty and drank a mug of beer. At a nearby table four men gambled at dice. Tamas went to watch the play and when one of the men departed, the others invited him to join their game. "You seem a prosperous lad; here's your chance to enrich yourself even further at our expense!"

Tamas hesitated, since he knew little of dice or gaming. He thrust his hands into his pockets and touched the green pearl, which sent a pulse of reckless confidence coursing along his nerves.

"Certainly!" Tamas cried out. "Why not?" He slid into the vacant seat. "You must explain your game to me, since I lack experience at such sport."

The other men at the table laughed jovially. "All the better for you!" said one. "Beginner's luck is the rule!"

Another said: "The first thing to remember is that if you win your count, you must not forget to collect your wager. Secondly, and even more important from our point of view, if you lose, you must pay! Is that clear?"

"Absolutely!" said Tamas.

"Then, just as a gentlemanly courtesy, show us the colour of your money."

Tamas brought the green pearl from his pocket. "Here is a gem worth twenty gold pieces; this is my surety! I have no smaller moneys."

The other players looked at the pearl in perplexity. One of them said: "It may be worth exactly as you claim, but how do you expect to gamble on that basis?"

"Very simply. If I win, I win and nothing more need be

said. If I lose, I lose until I am in debt to the amount of twenty gold pieces, whereupon I give up my pearl and depart in poverty."

"All very well," said another of the gamblers. "Still, twenty gold pieces is a goodly sum. Suppose I were to win a single gold piece and thereupon had enough of the game; what then?"

"Is it not absolutely clear?" demanded Tamas peevishly. "You then give me nineteen gold pieces, take the pearl and depart with your gains."

"But I lack the nineteen gold pieces!"

The third gambler cried out: "Come, let us play the game! No doubt matters will sort themselves out!"

"Not yet!" cried the cautious gambler. He turned to Tamas. "The pearl is useless in this game; have you no smaller coins?"

A red-haired red-bearded man wearing the varnished hat and striped trousers of a seaman came forward. He picked up the green pearl and scrutinized it with care. "A rare gem, of perfect luster and remarkable color! Where did you find this marvel?"

Tamas had no intention of telling everything he knew. "I am a fisherman from Mynault, and we bring ashore all manner of marine treasure, especially after a storm."

"It is a fine jewel," said the cautious gambler. "Still, in this game you must play with coins."

"Come then!" cried the others. "Put out your stakes; let the game begin!"

Tamas grudgingly laid down ten coppers, which he had been reserving for the night's supper and lodging.

The game proceeded and Tamas' luck was good. First cop-

per, then silver coins rose before him in stacks of gratifying height; he began to play for ever higher stakes, deriving assurance from the green pearl which rested among his winnings.

One of the gamblers abandoned the game in disgust. "Never have I seen such turns of the dice! I cannot defeat both Tamas and the goddess Fortunato!"

The red-bearded seaman, who named himself Flary, decided to join the game. "It is probably a lost cause, but I too will challenge this wild fisherman from Mynault."

The game proceeded once again. Flary, an expert gambler, secretly introduced a pair of weighted dice into the game, and seizing an appropriate opportunity, placed a wager of ten gold pieces on the board. He called out: "Fisherman, can you meet such a wager?"

"My pearl is security!" responded Tamas. "Start the game!"

Flary cast down the dice and once more, to Flary's great perplexity, Tamas had won the stakes.

Tamas laughed at Flary's discomfiture. "That is all for tonight. I have gambled long and hard, and my winnings will buy me a fine new boat. My thanks to you all for a profitable evening."

Flary pulled at his beard and squinted sidelong as Tamas counted his money. As if on sudden inspiration Flary swooped down upon the table and pretended to inspect the dice. "As I suspected! Such luck is unnatural! These are weighted dice! We have been robbed!"

There was sudden silence, then an outburst of fury. Tamas was seized, dragged out to the yard behind the tavern and there beaten black and blue. Flary meanwhile retrieved his dice, his gold pieces and also possessed himself of the green pearl.

Well pleased with the night's work, he departed the tavern and went his way.

4

The Skyre, a long bight of protected water, separated North Ulfland from the ancient Duchy of Fer Aquila, now Godelia, realm of the Celts.* Two towns of very different character looked at each other across the Skyre: Xounges, at the tip of a stony peninsula, and Dun Cruighre, Godelia's principal port.

In Xounges, behind impregnable defenses, Gax, the aged king of North Ulfland, maintained the semblance of a court. The Ska, who effectively controlled Gax's kingdom, tolerated his shadowy pretensions only because an attempt to storm the town would cost far more Ska blood than they were willing to spend. When old Gax died, the Ska would take the town through intrigue or bribery: whichever best served practicality.

Viewed from the Skyre, Xounges showed an intricate pattern of gray stone and black shadow, under roofs of mouldering brown tile. In total contrast, Dun Cruighre spread back from the docks in an untidy clutter of warehouses, hostleries, barns, shipwright's shops, taverns and inns, thatched cottages and an occasional two-story stone manse. The heart of Dun Cruighre was its noisy and sometimes raucous square, often the scene of impromptu horse-races, for the Celts were great ones at contention of any sort.

Dun Cruighre was enlivened by much coming and going, with constant sea-traffic to and from Ireland and Britain. A

* See Glossary I

Christian monastery, the Brotherhood of Saint Bac boasted a dozen famous relics and attracted pilgrims by the hundreds. Ships from far lands lay alongside the docks, and traders set up booths to display their imports: silk and cotton from Persia; jade, cinnabar and malachite from various lands; perfumed waxes and palm-oil soap from Egypt; Byzantine glass and Rimini faience — all to be exchanged for Celtic gold, silver or tin.

The inns of Dun Cruighre ranged in quality from fair to good: somewhat better, in fact, than might have been expected, for which the itinerant priests and monks could be thanked, since their tastes were demanding and their pouches tended to chink loud with coin. The most reputable tavern of Dun Cruighre was the Blue Ox, which offered private chambers to the wealthy and straw pallets in a loft to the penurious. In the common room, fowl constantly turned on a spit, and bread came fresh from the oven; travellers often declared that a plump roast pullet, stuffed with onions and parsley, with fresh bread and butter, and a pint or two of the Blue Ox ale made as good a meal as could be had anywhere in the Elder Isles. On fine days service was provided at tables in front of the inn, where patrons could eat and drink and watch the events of the square, which in this boisterous town never lacked for interest.

Halfway through one such fine morning a person of portly habit, wearing a brown cassock, came to sit at one of the Blue Ox's outside tables. His face was confident and clever, with round alert eyes, a short nose, and an expression of genial optimism. With nimble white fingers and an earnest snapping of small white teeth he devoured first a roast pullet, then a dozen honey-cakes, meanwhile drinking grandly of mead

from a pewter mug. His cassock, if judged by its cut and the excellence of its weave, suggested a clerical connection, but the gentleman had thrown back his hood and where once his pate had been shaved clean, a crop of brown hair now once again was evident.

From the common room of the tavern came a young man of aristocratic demeanour. He was tall and strong, clean-shaven and clear of eye, with an expression of tranquil good humor, as if he found the world a congenial place in which to be alive. His garments were casual: a loose shirt of white linen, trousers of gray twill and an embroidered blue vest. He looked right and left, then approached the table where sat the gentleman in the brown cassock. He asked: "Sir, may I join you? The other tables are occupied and, if possible, I would enjoy the air of this fine morning."

The gentleman in the cassock made an expansive gesture: "Be seated at your pleasure! Allow me to recommend the mead; today it is both sweet and strong, and the honey-cakes are flawless. Indeed, I plan an immediate second acquaintance with both."

The newcomer settled himself into a chair. "The rules of your order are evidently both tolerant and liberal."

"Ha ha, not so! The restrictions are austere and the penalties are harsh. My transgressions, in fact, have brought me expulsion from the order."

"Hmm! It seems an exaggerated response. A sip or two of mead, a taste of honey-cake: where is the harm in this?"

"None whatever!" declared the ex-priest. "I must admit that the issues possibly went a trifle deeper, and I may even found a new brotherhood, devoid of those stringencies which too often make religion a bore. I am restrained only because

I do not wish to be branded a heretic. Are you yourself a Christian?"

The young man made a negative sign. "The concepts of religion baffle me."

"This inscrutability is perhaps not unintentional," said the ex-priest. "It gives endless employment to dialecticians who otherwise might become public charges or, at very worst, swindlers and tricksters. May I ask whom I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"Of course. I am Sir Tristano of Castle Mythric in Troicinet. And yourself?"

"I also am of noble blood, or so it seems to me. For the nonce, I use the name my father gave me, which is Orlo."

Sir Tristano, signaling the servant girl, ordered mead and honey-cakes for both himself and Orlo. "I assume, then, that you have definitely resigned from the church?"

"Quite so. It makes for a sordid tale. I was called before the abbot that I might answer to charges of drunkenness and wenching. I put forward my views in a manner to enlighten and convince any reasonable person. I assured the abbot that our merciful Lord God would never have created succulent pasties nor smacking ale, not to mention the charms of merry-hearted women, had he not wished these commodities to be enjoyed to the fullest."

"The abbot no doubt fell back upon dogma for his rebuttal?"

"Precisely! He cited passage after passage from the scriptures to justify his position. I suggested that errors might well have crept into the translation, and that, until we were absolutely sure that self-starvation and tormented glands were the will of our glorious Lord, I proposed that we give

ourselves the benefit of the doubt. The abbot nevertheless cast me out."

"Self-interest also guided him; of this I have no doubt!" said Sir Tristano. "If every one worshipped in the manner he found most congenial, the abbot, and the pope as well, would find themselves with no one to instruct."

At this moment Sir Tristano's attention was attracted by a scene of activity across the square. "What is the commotion yonder? Everyone is dancing and skipping as if they were on their way to a festival."

"It is indeed a celebration of sorts," said Orlo. "For close on a year a bloody-handed pirate has been terrorizing the sea. Have you heard the name 'Flary the Red'?"

"I have indeed! Mothers use the name to frighten their children."

"Flary is a none-such!" said Orlo. "He has elevated cutthroat daring to a pinnacle of virtuosity, and always he has worn a lucky green pearl in his ear. One day he misplaced his pearl, but nevertheless launched an attack. This was his great mistake. What seemed a fat merchantman was a trap, and fifty Godelian fire-eaters swarmed aboard the pirate ship. Red Flary was captured and today he will lose his head. Shall we observe the ceremony?"

"Why not? Such spectacles assert the inevitable triumph of virtue, and we will be better men for the instruction."

"Well spoken! I could wish that all men were so rational!"

The two made their way to the executioner's platform, and here Orlo was prompted to chide a gray-faced little man who sought to rifle his pouch. "Fellow, your conduct is leading you directly up to the executioner's block! Have you no foresight? I now must turn you over to the guard!"

"Pest take you!" The pick-pocket jerked free from Orlo's grasp. "There were no witnesses!"

"Wrong!" spoke Sir Tristano. "I saw the whole thing! I myself will summon the guard!"

The pick-pocket uttered another epithet and, dodging away, was lost in the press.

"A thoroughly unpleasant incident," said Orlo. "The more so since all hearts should now be gay and all faces radiant with joy."

Sir Tristano felt impelled to add a qualification: "Save only the heart and face of Flary the Red."

"That goes without saying."

From the crowd came muted cries of anticipation as a pair of black-masked jailers pulled Flary up to the platform. Behind came a massive man, also masked in black, moving with a stately, even pompous, tread. He carried an enormous axe on his shoulder, and in his wake ambled a priest, smiling first to one side, then the other.

A crier, dressed parti-color in green and red, jumped to the platform. He bowed toward a construction of raised benches where sat Emmence, Earl of Dun Cruighre, with his friends and family. The crier addressed the throng: "Hear, all ye gracious gentlefolk, as well as all other classes of the region: low, high and ordinary. Hear, I say, and all will learn of the justice imposed by Lord Emmence upon the clapperclaw Flary the Red! His guilty acts are many and not in dispute; his death is perhaps too merciful. Flary, speak your final words on this world which you have so misused!"

"I sorely regret my capture," said Flary. "The green pearl betrayed me; it harms all who touch it! I knew that someday it would bring me to the block, and so it has."

The crier demanded: "Are you not awed as you stand here facing your doom? Is it not time to come to terms with yourself and the world?"

Flary blinked and touched the green pearl which he wore in his ear. He spoke in a halting voice: "To both questions, I reply in the affirmative, especially to the last. It is time and more than time that I think hard and deep upon such matters, and since there are many incidents and events to review, I hereby request a stay of execution."

The crier looked toward Lord Emmence. "Sir, is this request allowed or denied?"

"It is denied."

"Ah well, perhaps I have thought long enough," said Flary. "The priest has put a choice to me. I may either repent my sins and be shriven, and thereby ascend to the glories of Paradise; or I may refuse to repent, and not be shriven, and thereby suffer forever the torments of Hell." Flary paused and looked around the crowd. "Lord Emmence, gentlefolk, persons of all degrees! Know then; I have made my decision!" He paused again, and held his clenched fists dramatically high, and all the folk present leaned forward to learn what Flary's decision might be.

Flary cried out: "I repent! I sorely regret those crimes which have brought me to my present shame! To each man, woman and child within my hearing I utter this advice: stray never an inch from the path of rectitude! Bear true faith to your earl, your father and mother and to the great Lord God, who I hope will now pardon my mistakes! Priest, come now! Shrive me my sins, and send me flying clean and pure heavenward where I may take my place among the angels of the sky and rejoice forever in transcendent bliss!"

The priest stepped forward; Red Flary knelt and the priest performed those rites requested of him.

The priest retreated from the platform. The crowd began to mutter and stir and everywhere there was a craning of necks.

Lord Emmence raised his baton and let it fall. The jailers thrust Flary to the block; the executioner raised his axe on high, held it poised, then struck. Flary's head dropped into a basket. A small green object bounced free, rolled to the edge of the platform, and fell almost at Sir Tristano's feet.

Sir Tristano jerked back in distaste. "Look, there is Flary's pearl, red with his blood." He bent his head. "Almost it seems alive. See how the blood seethes and crawls along the surface!"

"Stand back!" cried Orlo. "Do not touch it! Remember Flary's words!"

From under the platform reached a long thin arm; thin fingers clutched the pearl. Sir Tristano stamped smartly down upon the bony wrist, and from under the platform came a shrill scream of pain and anger.

A nearby guard came to look. "What is this disturbance?"

Sir Tristano pointed under the platform; the guard seized the arm and pulled out a small gray-faced man with a long broken nose. "What have we here?"

"A thief and pick-pocket, unless I am very much mistaken," said Sir Tristano. "Examine his pouch and discover what sort of loot he carries."

The pick-pocket was dragged to the platform; his pouch was turned out, yielding coins, brooches, golden chains, clasps and buttons, which folk from the crowd came forward in all excitement to claim.

Lord Emmence rose to his feet. "I discover here an exercise in sheer impudence! While we rid ourselves of one thief, another circulates among us, stealing those valuables and ornaments which we have worn for the occasion. Hangman, your axe is sharp! The block is ready! Your muscles are in good tone! Today you shall earn a double fee. Priest, shrive this man and ease his soul for the journey he is about to take."

Sir Tristano told Orlo: "I am sated with head-loppings; let us return to our mead and honey-cakes . . . Still, what shall we do with the pearl? We cannot leave it lying in the dirt."

"One moment." Orlo found a twig, which he split with his knife, then cleverly caught the pearl in the cleft. "In such matters, one cannot be too cautious. Already today we have seen the fate of two who have avidly seized the pearl."

"I do not want it," said Sir Tristano. "It is yours."

"Impossible! Remember, if you will, that I am vowed to poverty! Or, better to state, I am reconciled to the condition."

Sir Tristano gingerly picked up the twig and the two returned to the Blue Ox, where once more they sat down to their refreshment. "It is only just noon," said Sir Tristano. "Today I had planned to set out along the road to Avallon."

"I am of the same inclination," said Orlo. "Shall we ride together?"

"Your company is most welcome, but what of the pearl?"

Orlo scratched his cheek. "Now that I think of it, nothing could be simpler. We will walk to the pier, and drop the pearl into the harbor, and that will be the end of it."

"Sound thinking! Bring it along, then."

Orlo squinted down at the pearl in distaste. "Like yourself,

I am made queasy by the sultry gleam of the thing. Still, we are in this affair together, and fairness must be observed." He pointed to a fly which had settled on the table. "Put down your hand beside mine. I will move first, then you must move, as much or as little as you wish, but you must always go at least beyond my hand. When the fly at last departs in fright, whoever moved his hand last shall carry the pearl."

"Agreed."

The trial was made, and each man moved his hand according to his best reading of the fly's emotion, but eventually, the fly took alarm at Sir Tristano's sudden move and flew away.

Sir Tristano groaned. "Alas! I must carry the pearl!"

"But not for long, and only so far as the dock."

Sir Tristano gingerly lifted the end of the twig and the two crossed the square to a vacant place on the dock, with all the Skyre before them.

Orlo spoke: "Pearl, farewell! We hereby return you to that salt green element from which you originated. Sir Tristano, cast away, and with a will!"

Tristano tossed twig and pearl into the sea. The two watched as the gem sank from view, then returned to their table. Here, clean and wet, they discovered the pearl, directly in front of Sir Tristano's place, causing the hairs to rise at the back of his neck.

"Ha ha!" said Orlo. "So the thing has decided to play us tricks! Let it beware! We are not without resource! In any event, sir knight, time has not come to a halt and our way is long. Take up the pearl and let us be on our way. Perhaps we shall meet the archbishop, who will be grateful for a gift."

Sir Tristano dubiously looked down at the pearl. "You then advise that I should carry this object upon my person?"

Orlo held out his hands. "Would you leave it here for some poor wight of a serving boy?"

Sir Tristano grimly split another twig and took up the pearl in the cleft. "Let us be on our way."

The two men procured their horses from the stables and departed Dun Cruighre. The road led first along the shore: past sandy beaches pounded by surf and, at intervals, a fisherman's hut. As they rode they spoke of the pearl.

Orlo said: "When I reflect upon this strange object, I seem to detect a pattern. The pearl fell to the ground, where it belonged to no one. The pick-pocket seized upon it and so it became his. You stamped on the pick-pocket's wrist, and in effect wrested away the pearl and took it into your own custody. But since you have not touched the pearl, it cannot work its magic upon you."

"You feel, then, that it can cause me no harm unless I touch it?"

"That is my guess, inasmuch as such an act would represent your intent to partake of the pearl's evil."

"I expressly deny any such intent and I hereby state that any contact, should it occur, must be considered accidental by all parties to the incident." Sir Tristano looked at Orlo. "What is your opinion of that?"

Orlo shrugged. "Who knows? Such a disclaimer may—or may not—dampen the evil ardor of the pearl."

The road turned inland and presently Sir Tristano pointed ahead. "Mark the bell-tower which rises so high above the trees! It surely signifies the church of a village."

"Undoubtedly so. They are great ones for churches, these Celts; nevertheless they are still more pagan than Christian. In every forest you will find a druid's grove and when the

moon shines full they leap through fires with antlers tied to their heads. How does it go in Troicinet?"

"We do not lack for Druids," said Sir Tristano. "They hide in the forests and are seldom seen. Most folk, however, revere the Earth-goddess Gaea, but in an easy fashion, without blood, nor fire, nor guilt. We celebrate only four festivals: to Life in the spring; to the Sun and Sky in the summer; to the Earth and Sea in the autumn; to the Moon and Stars in the winter. On our birthdays, we place gifts of bread and wine on the votive stone at the temple. There are neither priests nor creed, which makes for a simple and honest worship, and it seems to suit the nature of our people very well . . . And there is the village with its grand church, where, unless my eyes deceive me, an important ceremony is in progress."

"You are observing the panoplies of a Christian funeral," said Orlo. He drew up his horse and slapped his leg. "A notable scheme has occurred to me. Let us look in on this funeral."

Dismounting, the two men tied their horses to a tree and entered the church. Three priests chanted above an open coffin as mourners filed past to pay their last respects.

Sir Tristano asked in a somewhat anxious voice: "Exactly what do you have in mind?"

"I conceive that the holy rites of a Christian burial must effectively stifle the evil force of the pearl. The priests are uttering benedictions by the score and Christian virtue hangs thick in the air. The pearl must surely be confounded, absolutely and forever, when surrounded by such a power."

"Possibly true," said Tristano dubiously. "But practical difficulties stand in the way. We cannot possibly intrude upon this mournful rite."

"No need whatever," said Orlo in a jaunty fashion. "Let us join the mourners. When we reach the coffin I will distract the priests while you drop the pearl among the cerements."

"It is at least worth a try," said Sir Tristano and so the deed was done.

The two stood back to see the coffin lid closed down on corpse and pearl together. Pall-bearers carried the coffin to a grave dug deep into the mold of the churchyard; four sextons lowered the coffin into the grave and, amid the wailing of the bereaved, the coffin was covered with sod.

"A good funeral!" declared Orlo with satisfaction. "I also notice a sign yonder which betokens the presence of an inn, where perhaps you may wish to take lodging for the night."

"What of yourself?" asked Sir Tristano. "Do you not intend to sleep under a roof?"

"I do indeed, but here, sadly enough, our paths diverge. At the crossroad you will bear to the right, along the road to Avallon. I, however, will turn to the left and an hour's ride will bring me to the manor of a certain widowed lady whose lonely hours I hope to console or even enliven. So then, Sir Tristano, I bid you farewell!"

"Orlo, farewell, and I regret parting with so good a companion. Remember, at Castle Mythric you will always be welcome."

"I will not forget!" Orlo rode off down the street. At the crossroad he turned, looked back, raised his arm in farewell and was gone.

Sir Tristano, now somewhat melancholy, rode into the village. At the Sign of the Four Owls he applied for lodging and was conducted up a flight of stairs to a loft under the thatch. His chamber was furnished with a straw pallet, a table, a chair,

an old commode and a carpet of fresh reeds.

For his supper Sir Tristano ate boiled beef, served in its own broth with carrots and turnips, with bread and a relish of minced horseradish in cream. He drank two tall mugs of ale and, fatigued by the exertions of the day, went early to his chamber.

Quiet held the village, and a near-absolute darkness, with an overcast cloaking the sky, until close on midnight, when the clouds broke open to reveal a sad quartering moon.

Sir Tristano slept well until this time, when he was awakened by the sound of slow footsteps in the hall. The door to his chamber squeaked ajar, and footsteps told of a presence slowly entering the room, and approaching the pallet. Sir Tristano lay rigid. He felt the touch of cold fingers, and an object dropped upon the cloak which covered his chest.

The steps shuffled back across the room. The door eased shut. The steps moved away down the corridor and soon could be heard no more.

Sir Tristano gave a sudden hoarse outcry and jerked up his cloak. A luminous green object fell to the floor and came to rest among the reeds.

Sir Tristano at last fell into a troubled sleep. The cool red rays of dawn, entering the window, awakened him. He lay staring up at the thatch. The events of last night: were they a nightmare? What a boon, if so! Raising on an elbow, he scrutinized the floor, and almost at once discovered the green pearl.

Sir Tristano arose from his bed. He washed his face, dressed in his clothes and buckled his boots, at all times keeping the green pearl under close surveillance.

In the commode he found a torn old apron which he folded

and used to pick up the pearl. With pad and pearl secure in his pouch he left the chamber. After a breakfast of porridge with fried cabbage, he paid his score and went his way.

At the crossroads he turned right along the road toward the Kingdom of Dahaut, which at last would take him to Avallon.

As he rode, he cogitated. The pearl had not been content with a Christian burial, and it was his until it was taken from him, by force or subterfuge.

During the early afternoon he came into the village Timbaugh. A pack of cur dogs, barking and snapping, raced out to warn him off, and only desisted when he alighted from his horse and pelted them with stones. At the inn he paused for a meal of bread and sausages, and as he drank ale an idea entered his mind.

With great care he inserted the pearl into one of the sausages, which he took out into the street. The dogs came out again to chide him, snarling and snapping and ordering him out of town. Sir Tristano cast down the sausage. "There it is: my good sausage which belongs to me and no other! I seem to have misplaced it. Whoever takes that sausage and its contents is a thief!"

A gaunt yellow cur darted close and devoured the sausage at a gulp. "So be it," said Sir Tristano. "The act was yours and none of my own."

Returning to the inn, he drank more ale, while turning over the logic of his act. All seemed sound. And yet . . . Nonsense. The dog had exercised a thieving volition. To the dog must now fall the problem of disposing of the pearl. And yet . . .

The longer Sir Tristano pondered, the weaker seemed the rationale which had guided his act. A persuasive point could be made that the dog had thought of the sausage as a gift.

In this case, the transfer of the pearl must be considered Tristano's rather crude subterfuge, and not in any way a bona fide theft.

Recalling his previous attempts to be rid of the pearl, Sir Tristano became ever more uneasy, and he began to wonder in what style the pearl might be returned to him.

A tumult in the street attracted his attention: a horrid howling, wavering between shrill and hoarse, which caused his stomach to knot. From along the road came the cry: "Mad dog! Mad dog!"

Sir Tristano hastily threw coins on the table and ran out to his horse, that he might depart the village Timbaugh in haste. He took note of the yellow dog, at a distance of a hundred yards, where it bounded back and forth, foaming at the mouth, meanwhile roaring its opinion of the world. It launched itself at a peasant lad who trudged beside a hay-cart; the boy leapt up on the hay and, seizing a pitch-fork, thrust down to pierce the dog through the neck. The dog fell over backward, and shaking furiously as if it were wet, bounded away, still trailing the pitch-fork.

An old man trimming the thatch of his cottage, ran inside and emerged with a longbow; he nocked, drew and let fly an arrow; it drove through the dog's chest, so that the point protruded from one side and feathers from the other; the dog paid no heed.

Glaring up the road, the dog took note of Sir Tristano, and fixed on him as the source of its travail. Moving at first with sinister deliberation, head low, one leg carefully placed before the other, it approached, then, halting and moaning, it lunged to the attack.

Sir Tristano jumped on his horse and galloped away down

the road with the dog, baying and groaning deep hoarse tones, coming in hot pursuit. The pitch-fork fell from its neck; the dog closed in on the horse, and began to leap at its flanks. With sword on high, Sir Tristano leaned low, and slashed down, to split the dog's skull. The dog turned a somersault into the ditch, quivered and lay watching Sir Tristano through glazing yellow eyes. Slowly it crawled up from the ditch, sliding on its belly, inch after inch.

Sir Tristano watched fascinated, sword at the ready.

Ten feet from Sir Tristano the dog went into a convulsion, vomited into the road, then lay back and became still. In the puddle it had brought from its belly the green pearl gleamed.

Sir Tristano considered the situation with vast distaste. At last he dismounted, and going to a thicket, cut a twig and split the end. Using the same technique as before, he clamped on the pearl and lifted it from the road.

In the near distance a bridge of a single arch spanned a small river. Leading his horse and carrying the pearl as far from his body as the length of the twig allowed, Sir Tristano marched to the bridge, where he tied his horse to a bush. Clambering down to the stream, he washed the pearl with care, then washed his sword and wiped it dry on a clump of coarse sedge.

A sound attracted his attention. Looking up, he discovered on the bridge a tall thin man with a narrow face, long bony jaw, high broken nose, and long sharp chin. The tall crown of his hat, wound with red and white ribbons, advertised the profession of barber and blood-letter.

Sir Tristano, ignoring the keen scrutiny from above, rolled the pearl in a pad of cloth and tucked it into his pouch, then

climbed back to the road.

The barber, now standing by his cart, doffed his hat and performed a somewhat obsequious salute. "Sir, allow me to state that I sell elixirs against your infirmities; I will barber your hair, shave your face, cut the most stubborn toenails, lance boils, clean ears, and draw blood. My fees are fair, but not mean; you will nevertheless consider the money well-spent."

Sir Tristano mounted his horse. "I need none of your goods nor services; good day to you."

"One moment, sir. May I ask where you are bound?"

"To Avallon in Dahaut."

"You ride a long road. There is an inn at the village Toomish but I suggest that you ride on to Phaidig, where the Crown and Unicorn is justly famous for its mutton pies."

"Thank you. I will bear your advice in mind."

Three miles along the road Sir Tristano came to Toomish, and as Long Liam the Barber had suggested, the inn seemed to offer no great comfort. Although the afternoon was drawing to its close, Sir Tristano continued onward toward Phaidig.

The sun sank into a bank of clouds, and at the same time the road entered a heavy forest. Sir Tristano looked frowningly into the gloom. His choices were two: he could either ride on through the ominously dark woods or return to Toomish and its uninviting inn.

Sir Tristano made his choice. Touching up his horse to a canter, Sir Tristano entered the wood. After a half mile the horse stopped short and Sir Tristano saw that a barricade of poles had been placed across the road.

A voice spoke to his back: "Arms on high! Lest you wish an arrow in the back!"

Sir Tristano raised his arms in the air.

The voice said: "Do not turn, do not glance aside, and offer no tricks! My associate will approach you while I watch down the length of my arrow! Now then, Padraig, about your work! If he so much as quivers, cut him deep with your razor, I mean your knife."

A rustle of careful steps sounded in the road; hands pulled at the thongs which tied the wallet to Sir Tristano's belt.

Sir Tristano spoke: "Stop! You are taking the great green pearl!"

"Naturally!" said the voice from a point close behind. "That is the whole point of robbery: to acquire the victim's valuables!"

"You now have all my wealth; may I depart?"

"By no means! We want your horse and saddlebags too!"

Sir Tristano, assured that a single footpad had waylaid him, clapped spurs to his horse, bent low, and rode pell-mell around the barricade. He looked over his shoulder to see a very tall man shrouded in a black cloak, with a hood concealing his face. A bow hung at his shoulder; he snatched it free and let fly an arrow, but the light was poor, the target fugitive and the range long; the arrow sang harmlessly away through the foliage.

Sir Tristano galloped his horse until he had won free of the woods, and the threat of pursuit was past. He rode with a light heart; in his wallet he had carried, along with the green pearl, only two or three small silver coins and half a dozen copper groats. For protection against just such events, he carried his gold in his slotted belt.

Full dusk drowned the landscape with purple-gray shadow before Sir Tristano came to Phaidig, and there he took lodging

at the Crown and Unicorn, where he was nicely accommodated in a clean private chamber.

As Long Liam the Barber had attested, the mutton pie was of excellent quality, and Sir Tristano felt that he had dined well. Casually he inquired of the landlord: "What of robbers in these parts? Do they often molest travellers?"

The landlord looked over his shoulder, then said: "We hear reports of one who calls himself 'Tall Toby' and his favorite resort appears to be the woods between here and Toomish."

"I will offer you a hint," said Sir Tristano. "Are you acquainted with Long Liam the Barber?"

"Of course! He plies his trade everywhere about these parts. He also is a very tall man."

"I will say no more," said Sir Tristano. "Save only this: the correspondence goes somewhat deeper than mere stature, and the King's Warden might well be interested in the news."

5

Long Liam the Barber wended his way by lane and by-road south into Dahaut, that he might ply his trade at the harvest festivals of the late summer. Arriving at the town Mildenberry, he did brisk trade and one afternoon was summoned to Fotes Sachant, the country house of Lord Imbold. A footman took him into a drawing room, where he learned that, owing to the illness of the valet, he would be required to shave Lord Imbold's face and trim his mustache.

Long Liam performed his duties with adequate proficiency, and was duly complimented by Lord Imbold, who also admired the green pearl in the ring worn by Long Liam. So distinctive

and remarkable did Lord Imbold think the gem that he asked Long Liam to put a price on the piece.

Long Liam thought to take advantage of the situation and quoted a large sum: "Your Lordship, this confection was given to me by my dying grandfather, who had it from the Sultan of Egypt. I could not bear to part with it for less than fifty gold crowns."

Lord Imbold became indignant. "Do you take me for a fool?" He turned away and called to the footman. "Taube! Pay this fellow his fee and show him out."

Long Liam was left alone while Taube went to fetch the coins. Exploring the room, he opened a cupboard and discovered a pair of gold candlesticks which inflamed his avarice to such an extent that he tucked them into his bag and closed up the cupboard.

Taube returned in time to notice Long Liam's suspicious conduct, and went to look into the bag. In a panic Long Liam slashed out with his razor, and cut a deep gash into Taube's neck, so that his head fell back over his shoulders.

Long Liam fled from the chamber but was taken, adjudged and led to the gallows.

A crippled ex-soldier named Manting for ten years had served the county as executioner. He did his work efficiently and expunged Long Liam's life definitely enough, but in a style quite devoid of that extra element of surprise and poignancy, which distinguished the notable executioner from his staid colleague.

The perquisites of Manting's position included the garments and ornaments found on the corpse, and Manting came into possession of a valuable green pearl ring which he was pleased to wear for his own.

Thereafter, all who watched Manting declared that they had never seen the executioner's work done with more grace and attention to detail, so at times Manting and the condemned man seemed participants in a tragic drama which set every heart to throbbing; and at last, when the latch had been sprung, or the blow struck, or the torch tossed into the faggots, there was seldom a dry eye among the spectators.

Manting's duties occasionally included a stint of torture, where again he proved himself not only the adept at classical techniques, but deft and clever with his innovations.

Manting, however, while pursuing some theoretical concept, tended to over-reach himself. One day his schedule included the execution of a young witch named Zanice, accused of drying the udders of her neighbor's cow. Since an element of uncertainty entered the case, it was ordained that Zanice die by the garrote rather than by fire. Manting, however, wished to test a new and rather involved idea, and he used this opportunity to do so, and thereby aroused the fury of the sorcerer Qualmes, the lover of Zanice.

Qualmes took Manting deep into the Forest of Tantrevalles, along an obscure trail known as Ganion's Way, and led him a few yards off the trail into a little glade.

Qualmes asked: "Manting, how do you like this place?"

Manting, still wondering as to the reason for the expedition, looked all about. "The air is fresh. The verdure is a welcome change from the dungeons. The flowers yonder add to the charm of the scene."

Qualmes said: "It is fortunate that you are happy here, inasmuch as you will never leave this place."

Manting smilingly shook his head. "Impossible! Today I find myself at leisure, and this little outing is truly pleasant,

but tomorrow I must conduct two hangings, a strappado and a flogging."

"You are relieved of all such duties, now and forever. Your treatment of Zanice has aroused my deep emotion, and you must pay the penalty of your cruelty. Find yourself a pleasant place to recline, and choose a comfortable position, for I am imposing a spell of stasis upon you, and you will never move again."

Manting protested for several minutes, and Qualmes listened with a smile on his face. "Tell me, Manting, have any of your victims made similar protests to you?"

"Now that I think of it: yes."

"And what would be your response?"

"I always replied that, by the very nature of things, I was the instrument, not of mercy, but of doom. Here, of course, the situation is different. You are at once the adjudicator, as well as the executioner of the judgement, and so you are both able and qualified to consider my petition for mercy, or even outright pardon."

"The petition is denied. Recline, if you will; I cannot chop logic with you all day."

Manting at last was forced to recline on the turf, after which Qualmes worked his spell of paralysis and went his way.

Manting lay helpless day and night, week after week, month after month, while weasels and rats gnawed at his hands and feet, and hornets made their lodges in his flesh, until nothing remained but bones and the glowing green pearl, and even these were gradually covered under the mold.