

Preliminary

The Elder Isles and its peoples: a brief survey, which, while not altogether tedious, may be neglected by the reader impatient with facts.

The Elder Isles, now sunk beneath the Atlantic, in olden times were located across the Cantabrian Gulf (now the Bay of Biscay) from Old Gaul.

Christian chroniclers have little to say regarding the Elder Isles. Gildas and Nennius both make references to Hybras, though Bede is silent. Geoffrey of Monmouth alludes both to Lyonesse and Avallon, and perhaps other places and events which can less certainly be identified. Chrétien of Troyes rhapsodizes upon Ys and its pleasures; and Ys is also the frequent locale of early Armorican folk-tales. Irish references are numerous but confusing and contradictory.* St. Bresabius of Cardiff propounds a rather fanciful list of the Kings of Lyonesse; St. Columba inveighs against the 'heretics, witches, idolators and Druids' of the island he calls 'Hy Brasill', the medieval term for 'Hybras'. Otherwise the record is quiet.

Greeks and Phoenicians traded with the Elder Isles. Romans visited Hybras and many settled there, leaving behind aqueducts, roads, villas and temples. In the waning days of the Empire Christian dignitaries landed at Avallon amid vast pomp and panoply. They established bishoprics, appointed appropriate officials and spent good Roman gold to build

* See Glossary III.

their basilicas, none of which prospered. The bishops strove mightily against the olden gods, halflings and magicians alike, but few dared enter the Forest of Tantrevalles. Aspergillums, thuribles and curses proved futile against such as Dankvin the giant, Taudry the Weasoning, the fairies* of Pithpenny Shee. Dozens of missionaries, exalted through faith, paid terrible prices for their zeal. Saint Elric marched barefoot to Smoorish Rock where he intended to subdue the ogre Magre and bring him to the Faith. According to subsequent tale-tellers, Saint Elric arrived at noon and Magre politely agreed to hear his declaration. Elric spoke a mighty sermon, while Magre started the fire in his pit. Elric expounded, recited Scripture and sang the glories of the Faith. When he came to an end and declared his final 'Hallelujah!', Magre gave him a stoup of ale to ease his throat. Sharpening a knife he complimented Elric upon the fervor of his rhetoric. Then he smote off Elric's head, cut, drew, spitted, cooked and devoured the sanctified morsel with a garnish of leeks and cabbages. Saint Uldine attempted the baptism of a troll in the waters of Black Meira Tarn. She was indefatigable; he raped her four times during her efforts, until at last she despaired. In due course she gave birth to four imps. The first of these, Ignaldus, became father to the eery knight Sir Sacrontine who could not sleep of nights until he had killed a Christian. Saint Uldine's other children were Drathe, Alleia and Bazille.† In Godelia Druids never paused in the worship of Lug the Sun, Matrona the Moon, Adonis the Beautiful, Kernuun the Stag, Mokous the Boar, Kai the Dark, Sheah the Graceful, and innumerable local half-gods.

* See Glossary I.

† The deeds of the four have been chronicled in a rare volume, *Saint Uldine's Children*.

During this period Olam Magnus of Lyonesse, aided by Persilian, his so-called 'Magic Mirror', brought all the Elder Isles (excepting Skaghane and Godelia) under his rule. Styling himself Olam I, he enjoyed a long and prosperous reign and was succeeded by Rordec I, Olam II, then, briefly, by the 'Galician Cuckoos', Quarnitz I and Niffith I. Then Fafhion Long-nose reasserted the old blood line. He sired Olam III, who moved his throne Evandig and that great table known as Cairbra an Meadhan, the 'Board of Notables',* from Lyonesse Town to Avallon in the Duchy of Dahaut. When Olam III's grandson Uther II fled to Britain (there to sire Uther Pendragon, father of Arthur, King of Cornwall), the land fragmented to become ten kingdoms: Dahaut, Lyonesse, North Ulfland, South Ulfland, Godelia, Blaloc, Caduz, Pomperol, Dascinet and Troicinet.

The new kings found many pretexts for contention, and the Elder Isles entered a time of trouble. North and South Ulfland, exposed to the Ska,† became lawless wastes, occupied by robber knights and dire beasts. Only the Vale Evander, guarded to the east by the castle Tintzin Fyral and to the west by the city Ys, remained a realm of tranquility.

King Audry I of Dahaut at last took a fateful step. He declared that since he sat on the throne Evandig, he must be acknowledged King of the Elder Isles.

King Phristan of Lyonesse at once challenged him. Audry assembled a great army and marched down Icnield Way through Pomperol and into Lyonesse. King Phristan led his army north. At the Battle of Orm Hill the armies fought for two days and finally separated in mutual exhaustion. Both Phristan and Audry died in combat and both armies retired.

* The Round Table of King Arthur was later inspired by the Cairbra an Meadhan.

† See Glossary II.

Audry II failed to press his father's claim; effectively Phristan had won the battle.

Twenty years pass. The Ska have made serious inroads into North Ulfland and have taken to themselves a section known as the North Foreshore. King Gax, old, half-blind and helpless has gone into hiding. The Ska do not even trouble to search for him. The king of South Ulfland is Oriante, who resides at Castle Sfan Sfeg near the town Oäldes. His single son, Prince Quilcy, is feeble-minded and spends his days playing with fanciful dolls and doll-houses. Audry II is King of Dahaut and Casmir is King of Lyonesse, and both intend to become King of the Elder Isles and sit rightfully on the throne Evandig.

Chapter I

On a dreary winter's day, with rain sweeping across Lyonesse Town, Queen Sollace went into labor. She was taken to the lying-in room and attended by two midwives, four maids, Balhamel the physician and the crone named Dyltra, who was profound in the lore of herbs, and by some considered a witch. Dyltra was present by the wish of Queen Sollace, who found more comfort in faith than logic.

King Casmir made an appearance. Sollace's whimpers became moans and she clawed at her thick blonde hair with clenched fingers. Casmir watched from across the room. He wore a simple scarlet robe with a purple sash; a gold coronet confined his ruddy blond hair. He spoke to Balhamel. "What are the signs?"

"Sire, there are none as yet."

"There is no way to divine the sex?"

"To my knowledge, none."

Standing in the doorway, legs somewhat apart, hands behind his back, Casmir seemed the very embodiment of stern and kingly majesty, and indeed, this was an attitude which accompanied him everywhere, so that kitchen-maids, tittering and giggling, often wondered if Casmir wore his crown to the nuptial bed. He inspected Sollace from under frowning eyebrows. "It would seem that she feels pain."

"Her pain is not so much, sire, as might be. Not yet, at any rate. Remember, fear magnifies that pain which actually exists."

To this observation Casmir made no response. He noticed, in the shadows to the side of the room, Dyltra the crone, where she crouched over a brazier. He pointed with his finger: "Why is the witch here?"

"Sire," whispered the chief midwife, "she came at the behest of Queen Sollace!"

Casmir grunted. "She'll bring a wrack to the child."

Dyltra only crouched the lower over the brazier. She threw a handful of herbs on the coals; a waft of acrid smoke drifted across the room and touched Casmir's face; he coughed, backed away, and departed the room.

The maid drew hangings across the wet landscape and set the bronze lanterns alight. On the couch Sollace lay taut, legs outthrust, head thrown back, her regal bulk fascinating the attention of those who stood tending her.

The pangs became sharp; Sollace cried out, first for pain, then for rage that she should suffer like a common woman.

Two hours later the child was born: a girl, of no great size. Sollace closed her eyes and lay back. When the child was brought to her she waved it away and presently relaxed into a stupor.

The celebration attendant upon the birth of Princess Suldrun was muted. King Casmir issued no jubilant proclamation and Queen Sollace refused audience to all save a certain Ewaldo Idra, Adept of the Caucasian Mysteries. Finally, and only, so it seemed, that he might not contravene custom, King Casmir ordained a gala procession.

On a day of brittle white sunlight, cold wind and high hurrying clouds, the gates before Castle Haidion opened. Four heralds in white satin marched forth, at a stately step-

halt-step. From their clarions depended gonfalons of white silk, embroidered with the emblem of Lyonesse: a black Tree of Life, on which grew twelve scarlet pomegranates.* They marched forty yards, halted, raised clarions and blew the *Gladsome Tidings* fanfare. From the palace yard, on snorting white horses, rode four noblemen: Cypris, Duke of Skroy; Bannoy, Duke of Tremblance; Odo, Duke of Folize; and Sir Garnel, Knight Banneret of Castle Swange, nephew to the King. Next came the royal carriage, drawn by four white unicorns. Queen Sollace sat swathed in green robes, holding Suldrun on a crimson pillow; King Casmir rode his great black horse, Sheuvan, beside the carriage. Behind marched the Elite Guard, each of noble blood, carrying ceremonial silver halberds. At the rear rolled a wagon from which a pair of maidens tossed handfuls of pennies into the throng.

The procession descended the Sfer Arct, the central avenue of Lyonesse Town, to the Chale, the road which followed the semi-circle of the harbor. At the Chale, the procession circled the fish market and returned up the Sfer Arct to Haidion. Outside the gate, booths offered the king's pickled fish and biscuits to all who hungered; and ale to those who might wish to drink health to the new princess.

During the months of winter and spring King Casmir looked only twice at the infant princess, in each case standing back in cool disinterest. She had thwarted his royal will by coming female into the world. He could not immediately punish her for the act, no more could he extend the full beneficence of his favor.

* The usages of heraldry, as well as the theory and practice of chivalry, were still simple and fresh. They would not attain their full baroque extravagance for centuries to come.

Sollace grew sulky because Casmir was displeased and, with a set of petulant flourishes, banished the child from her sight.

Ehirme, a raw-boned peasant girl, and niece to an undergardener, had lost her own infant son to the yellow bloat. With an amplitude of both milk and solicitude she became Suldrun's wet-nurse.

Centuries in the past, at that middle-distant time when legend and history start to blur, Blausreddin the pirate built a fortress at the back of a stony semi-circular harbor. His concern was not so much assault from the sea, but surprise attacks down from the pinnacles and gorges of the mountains, to the north of the harbor.

A century later the Danaan king, Tabbro, enclosed the harbor behind a remarkable breakwater, and added the Old Hall, new kitchens and a set of sleeping chambers to the fortress. His son, Zoltra Bright Star, constructed a massive stone pier and dredged the harbor so that any ship in the world might moor at the pier.*

Zoltra further augmented the old fortress, adding the Great Hall and the West Tower, though he died before completion of the work, which continued through the reigns of Palaemon I, Edvarius I and Palaemon II.

The Haidion of King Casmir held aloft five major towers: the East Tower, the King's Tower, the Tall Tower (also known as the Eyrie), the Tower of Palaemon and the West Tower. There were five major halls: the Great Hall; the Hall of Honours; the Old Hall; the Clod an Dach Nair, or the

* According to legend both Tabbro and Zoltra Bright Star engaged Joald, a submarine giant, to aid in their undertakings, for an unknown compensation.

Banquet Hall; and the Small Refectory. Of these, the Great Hall was remarkable for its ponderous majesty, which seemed to transcend the scope of human effort. The proportions, the spaces and masses, the contrasts of shadow and light, which changed from morning to evening, and again to the moving illumination of flamboys: all acted together to awe the senses. The entrances were almost afterthoughts; in any case no one could achieve a dramatic entrance into the Great Hall. At one end a portal entered upon a narrow stage from which six wide steps descended into the hall, beside columns so massive that a pair of men, arms outstretched, could not enclasp them. To one side a row of high windows, glazed with thick glass now lavender with age, admitted a watery half-light. At night, flamboys in iron brackets seemed to cast as much black shadow as light. Twelve Mauretanian rugs eased the harshness of the stone floor.

A pair of iron doors opened into the Hall of Honours, which in scope and proportion resembled the nave of a cathedral. A heavy dark red carpet ran down the center from entrance to royal throne. Around the walls ranged fifty-four massive chairs, each signified by an emblem of nobility hanging on the wall above. On these chairs, for ceremonial occasions, sat the grandees of Lyonesse, each under the emblem of his ancestors. The royal throne, until Olam III moved it to Avallon, had been Evandig, and the round table Cairbra an Meadhan occupied the center of the hall where the noblest of the noble might discover their named places.

The Hall of Honours had been added by King Carles, last of the Methewen Dynasty. Chlowod the Red, first of the Tyrrhenians,* extended Haidion's precincts to the east of

* Chlowod's grandfather had been a Balearic Etruscan.

Zoltra's Wall. He paved the Urquial, Zoltra's old parade ground, and to the back built the massive Peinhador, in which were housed infirmary, barracks and penitentiary. The dungeons under the old armoury fell into disuse, with the ancient cages, racks, griddles, wheels, strappado lofts, presses, punches and twisting machines left to molder in the damp.

The kings proceeded to rule, one by one, and each augmented Haidion's halls, passages, prospects, galleries, towers and turrets, as if each, brooding on mortality, sought to make himself part of ageless Haidion.

For those who lived there, Haidion was a small universe indifferent to the events of elsewhere, though the membrane of separation was not impermeable. There were rumors from abroad, notices of the changing seasons, arrivals and excursions, an occasional novelty or alarm; but these were muffled murmurs, dim images, which barely stirred the organs of the palace. A comet flaring across the sky? Marvellous!—but forgotten when Shilk the pot-boy kicks the undercook's cat. The Ska have ravaged North Ulfland? The Ska are like wild animals; but this morning, after eating cream on her porridge, the Duchess of Skroy found a dead mouse in the cream jug, and here was emotion raw and stark, what with her outcries and shoes thrown at the maids!

The laws which ruled the small universe were exact. Status was graduated with the finest of discrimination, from high degree to lowest of the low. Each knew his quality and understood the delicate distinction between next highest (to be minimized) and next lowest (to be enforced and emphasized). Some encroached beyond their station, generating tension; the sharp stench of rancor hung in the air. Each scrutinized the conduct of those above, while concealing his own affairs from

those below. The royal personages were watched with care; their habits were discussed and analyzed a dozen times a day. Queen Sollace showed great cordiality to religious zealots and priests, and found much of interest in their creeds. She was thought to be sexually cold and never took lovers. King Casmir made connubial visits to her bed regularly, once each month, and they coupled with stately ponderosity, like the mating of elephants.

Princess Suldrun occupied a peculiar place in the social structure of the palace. The indifference of King Casmir and Queen Sollace was duly noted; petty discourtesies therefore might be visited upon Suldrun with impunity.

The years passed and, without any notice being taken, Suldrun became a quiet child with long soft blonde hair. Because no one saw fit to arrange otherwise, Ehirme made the leap in status from wet-nurse to the private maid of the princess.

Ehirme, untrained in etiquette and not greatly gifted in other ways, had assimilated lore from her Celtic grandfather, which across the seasons and over the years she communicated to Suldrun: tales and fables, the perils of far places, dints against the mischief of fairies, the language of flowers, precautions while walking out at midnight and the avoidance of ghosts, the knowledge of good trees and bad trees.

Suldrun learned of lands which lay beyond the castle. "Two roads lead from Lyonesse Town," said Ehirme. "You may go north through the mountains along the Sfer Arct, or you go east through Zoltra's Gate and across the Urquial. Presently you come to my little cottage and our three fields where we grow cabbages, turnips and hay for the beasts; then the road forks. To the right you follow the shore of the Lir all the way to Slute Skeme. To the left you fare north and join the

Old Street which runs beside the Forest of Tantrevalles where the fairies live. Two roads pass through the forest, north to south and east to west.”

“Tell what happens where they meet!” Suldrun already knew but she enjoyed the zest of Ehirme’s descriptions.

Ehirme warned her: “I’ve never fared so far, you understand! But what grandfather says is this: in the old times the crossroads would move about, because the place was enchanted and never knew peace. This might be well enough for the traveler, because, after all, he would put one foot ahead of him and then the other and the road would at last be won, and the traveler none the wiser that he had seen twice as much forest as he had bargained for. The most troubled were the folk who sold their goods each year at the Goblin Fair, and where was that but at the crossroads! The folk for the fair were most put out, because the fair should be at the crossroads on Midsummer Night, but when they arrived at the crossroads it had shifted two miles and a half, and nowhere a fair to be seen.

“About this time the magicians vied in awful conflict. Murgun proved the strongest and defeated Twitten, whose father was a halfling, his mother a bald priestess at Kai Kang, under the Atlas Mountains. What to do with the defeated magician, who seethed with evil and hate? Murgun rolled him up and forged him into a stout iron post, ten foot long and thick as my leg. Then Murgun took this enchanted post to the crossroads and waited till it shifted to the proper place, then he drove the iron post down deep in the center, fixing the crossroads so it no longer could move, and all the folk at the Goblin Fair were glad, and spoke well of Murgun.”

“Tell about Goblin Fair!”

“Well then, it’s the place and time when the halflings and

men can meet and none will harm the other, so long as he stays polite. The folk set up booths and sell all manner of fine things: cobweb cloth and wine of violets in silver bottles, books of fairy-skein, written with words that you can't get out of your head once they're in. You'll see all kinds of halflings: fairies and goblins, trolls and merrihews, and even an odd falloy, though they show themselves seldom, out of shyness, despite being the most beautiful of all. You'll hear songs and music and much chinking of fairy-gold, which they squeeze from buttercups. Oh they're a rare folk, the fairies!"

"Tell how you saw them!"

"Oh indeed! It was five years ago when I was with my sister who married the cobbler in Frogmarsh Village. One time, just at gloaming, I sat by the stile to rest my bones and watch while evening came over the meadow. I heard *tink-a-tink-tinkle*, and I looked and listened. Again: *tink-a-tink-tinkle*, and there, not twenty paces distant came a little fellow with a lantern that gave green light. From the beak of his cap hung a silver bell that went *tink-a-tink-tinkle* as he jumped along. I sat quiet as a post, till he was gone with his bell and green lantern, and that's all there is to it."

"Tell about the ogre!"

"No, that's quite enough for today."

"Do tell, please."

"Well, in truth I know not all that much. There are different sorts among the halflings, different as fox from bear, so that fairy and ogre and goblin and skite are different. All are enemies each to each, except at the Goblin Fair. The ogres live deep in the forest, and it's true, they'll take children and roast them on spits. So never you run too far into the forest for berries, lest you be lost."

"I'll be careful. Now tell me—"

"It's time for your porridge. And today, who knows? there might be a nice rosy apple in my bag yonder . . ."

Suldrun took lunch in her small sitting-room, or, if the weather were fine, in the orangery: delicately nibbling and sipping while Ehirme held the spoon to her mouth. In due course, she fed herself, with careful movements and sober concentration, as if the most important thing in the world were eating daintily, without mess.

Ehirme found the habit both absurd and endearing, and sometimes she would come up behind Suldrun, and say 'Boo!' in her ear, just as Suldrun opened her mouth for a spoonful of soup. Suldrun pretended to be outraged and reproached Ehirme: "That is a naughty trick!" Then she once more commenced to eat, watching Ehirme carefully from the corner of her eye.

Away from Suldrun's chambers Ehirme moved as unobtrusively as possible, but gradually the fact emerged that Ehirme the peasant girl had stolen a march on her betters. The matter was referred to Dame Boudetta, Mistress of the Household, a severe and uncompromising lady, born into the petty gentility. Her duties were manifold: she supervised the female servants, monitored their virtue, arbitrated questions of propriety. She knew the special conventions of the palace. She was a compendium of genealogical information and even greater masses of scandal.

Bianca, an upper-chamber maid, first brought complaint of Ehirme. "She's an outsider and doesn't even live at the palace. She comes in smelling of pigs and now she's taken to all manner of airs just because she sweeps out little Suldrun's bed-chamber."

"Yes, yes," said Dame Boudetta, speaking through her long high-bridged nose. "I know all about it."

"Another thing!" Bianca now spoke with sly emphasis. "Princess Suldrun, as we all know, has little to say, and may be just a trifle backward—"

"Bianca! That is quite enough!"

"—but when she does speak, her accent is atrocious! What when King Casmir decides to converse with the princess and hears the voice of a stable-boy?"

"Your point is well taken," said Dame Boudetta loftily. "Still, I have already given the matter thought."

"Remember, I am well suited to the office of personal maid and my accent is excellent, and I am thoroughly conversant with details of deportment and dress."

"I will keep this in mind."

In the end Dame Boudetta appointed a gentlewoman of middle quality to the post: in fact, her cousin Dame Maugelin, to whom she owed a favor. Ehirme was forthwith discharged and sent trudging home with hanging head.

Suldrun, at this time, was four years old, and ordinarily docile, gentle and easy of disposition, if somewhat remote and pensive. Upon learning of the change she stood transfixed in shock. Ehirme was the single living object in the world whom she loved.

Suldrun made no outcry. She climbed to her chamber, and for ten minutes stood looking down over the town. Then she wrapped her doll into a kerchief, pulled on her hooded cloak of soft gray lamb's-wool and quietly departed the palace.

She ran up the arcade which flanked the east wing of Haidion, and slipped under Zoltra's Wall by a dank passage twenty feet long. She ran across the Urquial, ignoring the grim

Peinhador and the gallows on the roof, from which dangled a pair of corpses.

With the Urquial behind, Suldrun trotted along the road until she was tired, then walked. Suldrun knew the way well enough: along the road to the first lane, left along the lane to the first cottage.

She shyly pushed open the door, to find Ehirme sitting glumly at a table, paring turnips for the supper soup.

Ehirme stared in astonishment. "And what are you doing here?"

"I don't like Dame Maugelin. I've come to live with you."

"Ah, little princess, but that won't do! Come, we must get you back before there's an outcry. Who saw you leave?"

"No one."

"Come then; quickly now. If any should ask, we're just out for the air."

"I don't want to stay there alone!"

"Suldrun, my dearest, you must! You're a royal princess, and you may never forget it! That means you do as you're told. Come along now!"

"But I won't do as I'm told, if it means that you'll be gone."

"Well, we'll see. Let's hurry; maybe we can slip in with none the wiser."

But Suldrun already had been missed. While her presence at Haidion meant nothing particular to anyone, her absence was a matter of great import. Dame Maugelin had searched the entire East Tower, from the garret under the roof-slates, which Suldrun was known to visit (Skulking and hiding, the secret little imp! thought Dame Maugelin), down through the observatory where King Casmir came to assess the harbor; beyond, down through the chambers on the next floor, which

included Suldrun's rooms. Finally, hot, tired and apprehensive, she descended to the main floor, to halt in mingled relief and fury to see Suldrun and Ehirme push open the heavy door and come quietly into the foyer at the end of the main gallery. In an angry swirl of robes Dame Maugelin descended the last three stairs and advanced upon the two. "Where have you been? We are all in a state of supreme anxiety! Come; we must find Dame Boudetta; the matter is in her hands!"

Dame Maugelin marched off down the gallery and along a side corridor to Dame Boudetta's office, with Suldrun and Ehirme following apprehensively behind.

Dame Boudetta heard Dame Maugelin's excited report and looked back and forth between Suldrun and Ehirme. The matter seemed of no great moment; in fact, trivial and tiresome. Still, it represented a certain amount of insubordination and so must be dealt with, briskly and decisively. The question of fault was irrelevant; Dame Boudetta ranked Suldrun's intelligence, sluggish though it might be, about on a par with the moony peasant stupidity of Ehirme. Suldrun, of course, could not be punished; even Sollace would rise in wrath, to learn that royal flesh had been scourged.

Dame Boudetta dealt practically with the affair. She turned a cold gaze upon Ehirme. "Now then, woman, what have you done?"

Ehirme, whose mind indeed was not agile, looked blankly at Dame Boudetta. "I have done nothing, my Lady." Then, hoping to ease matters for Suldrun, she blundered on: "It was just one of our little walks we were having. Wasn't it, Princess dear?"

Suldrun, looking from hawk-like Dame Boudetta to portly Dame Maugelin, discovered only expressions of cold dislike.

She said: "I went for a walk; that is true."

Dame Boudetta turned upon Ehirme. "How dare you take such liberties upon yourself! Were you not dismissed from your post?"

"Yes, my Lady, but it wasn't like that at all—"

"Tush, no more. I will hear no excuses." Boudetta signaled to a footman. "Take this woman to the yard and assemble the staff."

Sobbing in bewilderment Ehirme was led to the service yard beside the kitchen, and a gaoler was summoned down from the Peinhador. The palace staff was marshaled to watch, while Ehirme was bent over a trestle by a pair of footmen in Haidion livery. The gaoler came forward: a burly black-bearded man with a pallid, almost lavender, skin. He stood idly by, staring at the maids and twitching his scourge of willow-withes.

Dame Boudetta stood on a balcony, with Dame Maugelin and Suldrun. In a clear nasal voice she cried out: "Attention, staff! I cite this woman, Ehirme, for malfesance! Through folly and carelessness she sequestered the person of beloved Princess Suldrun, to cause us grief and consternation. Woman, can you now claim contrition?"

Suldrun cried out: "She didn't do anything! She brought me home!"

Beset by that peculiar passion which attends those at an execution, Dame Maugelin dared so far as to pinch Suldrun's arm and drew her roughly back. "Silence!" she hissed.

Ehirme bawled: "I'm shamed if I did wrong! I only walked the Princess home, in haste."

Dame Boudetta suddenly, in all clarity, perceived the truth of the matter. Her mouth sagged. She stepped forward. Events

had gone too far; her dignity was at stake. No doubt Ehirme had escaped punishment for other offenses. There was always her presumptuous behaviour to be paid off.

Dame Boudetta raised her hand. "For all, a lesson to be learned! Work dutifully! Never presume! Respect your superiors! Watch and take heed! Warden! Eight strokes, stringent but just."

The gaoler stood back, pulled a black executioner's mask over his face, then advanced upon Ehirme. He threw her brown furze skirt up over her shoulders, exposing a pair of ample white buttocks. He raised the switches high. *Thwish-wack!* A gasping cry from Ehirme. From the onlookers, a mingling of indrawn breaths and titters.

Dame Boudetta looked on impassively. Dame Maugelin showed a pursing mindless smile. Suldrun stood silently, biting her lower lip. With self-critical deliberation the gaoler wielded the scourge. While not a kindly man, he had no taste for pain and today he was in good humor. He contrived a mighty effort, swinging his shoulders, lurching, grunting, but laid small actual weight into his strokes and took away no skin. Ehirme nevertheless bellowed with each stroke, and all were awed by the severity of her thrashing.

". . . seven . . . eight. Enough," declared Dame Boudetta. "Trinthe, Molotta; attend the woman; dress her body with good oil, and send her home. The rest of you: return to your work!"

Dame Boudetta turned, marched from the balcony into a parlour for high-caste servants, such as herself, the senechal, the bursar, the sergeant of the palace guards and the master steward, where they could take refreshment and confer. Dame Maugelin and Suldrun followed.

Dame Boudetta faced Suldrun, to find her already half-way to the door. "Child! Princess Suldrun! Where are you going?"

Dame Maugelin ran heavy-legged to stand in Suldrun's way.

Suldrun halted, and looked from woman to woman, her eyes glinting with tears.

"Please give me your attention, Princess," said Dame Boudetta. "We are starting something new, which perhaps has been delayed too long: your education. You must learn to be a lady of esteem and dignity. Dame Maugelin will instruct you."

"I don't want her."

"Nevertheless, you shall have her, by particular order of gracious Queen Sollace."

Suldrun looked up full into Dame Boudetta's face. "Someday I will be Queen. Then you will be whipped."

Dame Boudetta opened her mouth, then shut it again. She took a quick step toward Suldrun, who stood half-passive, half-defiant. Dame Boudetta halted. Dame Maugelin, grinning mirthlessly, watched from the side, eyes looking in several directions.

Dame Boudetta spoke in a croaking voice, painfully gentle. "Now then, Princess Suldrun, I act only from devotion to yourself. It is not meet for either queen or princess to use peevish vindictiveness."

From Dame Maugelin came an unctuous corroboration: "So it is indeed. Remember the same for Dame Maugelin!"

"The punishment is now accomplished," declared Dame Boudetta, still using a careful and strained voice. "Everyone will surely be the better for it; now we must put it from our minds. You are the precious Princess Suldrun, and honest

Dame Maugelin will instruct you in the proprieties.”

“I do not want her. I want Ehirme.”

“Tush now, be complaisant.”

Suldrun was taken to her chamber. Dame Maugelin plumped herself in a chair, and began to work embroidery. Suldrun went to the window and stared out across the harbor.

Dame Maugelin trudged up the circular stone steps to Dame Boudetta’s apartments, hips rolling and thrusting under her dark brown gown. On the third floor she halted to pant, then went to an arched door of fitted timbers, bound with black iron straps. The door stood ajar. Dame Maugelin pushed it somewhat more open, with a creaking of iron hinges, so that she could pass her amplitude through the gap. She advanced to stand in the doorway, eyes darting to all corners of the room at once.

Dame Boudetta sat at a table, tendering rape-seed on the tip of a long thin forefinger to a caged tom-tit. “Peck, Dicco, peck! Like a gallant bird! Ah! That was a good one.”

Dame Maugelin crept a pace or two forward, and at last Dame Boudetta looked up. “What is it now?”

Dame Maugelin shook her head, wrung her hands and licked her pursing lips. “The child is like a stone. I can do nothing with her.”

Dame Boudetta made a short brittle sound. “You must be brisk! Arrange a schedule! Insist on obedience!”

Dame Maugelin held her arms wide, and spoke a single poignant word: “How?”

Dame Boudetta gave an annoyed snap of tongue against teeth. She turned back to the bird cage. “Dicco? Twit, twit, Dicco! One more peck and that is all . . . No more!” Dame

Boudetta rose to her feet, and with Dame Maugelin in her wake, went downstairs and up to Suldrun's chambers. She opened the door, looked into the sitting room.

"Princess?"

Suldrun made no response and, indeed, was nowhere to be seen.

The two advanced into the room. "Princess?" called Dame Boudetta. "Are you hiding from us? Come now; don't be naughty."

Dame Maugelin moaned in a sad contralto: "Where is the perverse little thing? I gave stern instructions that she must sit in her chair."

Dame Boudetta looked into the bed-chamber. "Princess Suldrun! Where are you?"

She cocked her head sidewise to listen, but heard nothing. The chambers were empty. Dame Maugelin muttered: "She's gone off again to the stour-woman."

Dame Boudetta went to the window thinking to overlook a view to the east, but the way was concealed by the slanting tiled roof over the arcade and the moldering bulk of Zoltra's Wall. Below was the orangery. To the side, half-hidden under dark green foliage, she noted the glimmer of Suldrun's white frock. Silent and grim she stalked from the room, followed by Dame Maugelin, hissing and muttering furious phrases under her breath.

They descended the stairs, went out and around to the orangery.

Suldrun sat on a bench playing with a wisp of grass. She noted the approach of the two women without emotion, and returned her attention to the grass.

Dame Boudetta halted and stood looking down at the small

blonde head. Anger surged up within her, but she was too clever and too wary to allow it tangible scope. Behind stood Dame Maugelin, mouth puckered in excitement, hoping that Dame Boudetta would deal roughly with the Princess: a shake, a pinch, a slap on the firm little buttocks.

Princess Suldrun raised her eyes and for a moment stared up at Dame Boudetta. Then, as if in boredom or apathy, she looked away, and Dame Boudetta was left with a strange sensation that she was seeing ahead, down long years of the future.

Dame Boudetta spoke in a voice grating with effort: "Princess Suldrun, you are not happy with Dame Maugelin's instruction?"

"I don't like her."

"But you like Ehirme?"

Suldrun merely twitched the grass stalk.

"Very well," said Dame Boudetta grandly. "So it will be. We cannot have our precious Princess unhappy."

A quick glance upward, which seemed to read Dame Boudetta through and through.

Dame Boudetta thought with bitter amusement: If that's the way it is, let it be. At least we understand each other.

To salvage face she said sternly: "Ehirme shall return, but you must heed Dame Maugelin, who will instruct your deportment."