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Abstract

Robin had not slept. He had only pretended, in a last effort to stop his punishment, and, thank Heaven, it had worked: Rose had left off talking and fallen into slumber on her side of the bed.

Keywords

Mythril; Mythopoeic; Fiction; Granion Soup; Phyllis A. Karr

GRANION SOUP

by Phyllis A. Karr

Robin had not slept. He had only pretended, in a last effort to stop his punishment, and, thank Heaven, it had worked: Rose had left off talking and fallen into slumber on her side of the bed.

So now he understood why the curtain lecture, delivered in bed after the candle was snuffed, was notorious as the wife's favourite means of discipline for the erring mate. "Ah, well," he consoled himself, "It's not every husband who goes more than a year before being initiated, and the fault was mine, for not determining whether it was baby's naptime before beginning to play my flute." Finally assured that his wife slept, he was about to drop off himself, when the bedroom door came open and a shadowy figure entered.

Robin edged out of bed, found his slippers, and removed his nightcap. Almost-forgotten scraps of vague dreaming had just burst like sky-rockets in his head, blossoming into clear memories of actual, if other-worldly, adventures, and thereby he knew this to be no ordinary intruder, and his sleeping wife and three-month-old daughter to be under no threat. But he was puzzled, for though his last mission to that strange other world of Tehzaria had ended in a kind of success, he'd muddled matters badly on his way to the end, and hardly expected ever to be entrusted with another commission.

His perplexity grew when, uncomfortably aware that he was clad in nothing but nightshirt and slippers, he obediently came to meet the dark figure and found it was not the Fairy this time, but a tall thin man in black robes. His dark three-pointed beard was streaked with blue, as an Earthman's would have been with silver, and the irises of his eyes glowed orange. His skin, Robin guessed, was probably green. On one of his fingers glowed a clear blue stone.

"I have been sent," said the apparition, "by the Fairy. Dress with speed, for you are needed." He slipped a sort of long thick lucifer from his sleeve and, to Robin's alarm, rubbed its tip into yellow Tehzarian flame against the stones of the fireplace. "Your wife will neither see nor hear," he reassured the Englishman. "You will be returned to the moment before you rose from your bed."

"If I live to be returned," thought Robin. The last time there had been moments when this happy termination was far from certain. Nevertheless, a summons from the Fairy was not to be argued with, and the young husband submissively lit the candle, gathered his clothes, and slipped behind the dressing-screen, while the Fairy's emissary stood gazing into his open wardrobe.

The gentleman farmer was in his linens and reaching for his brown breeches when his summoner, with the words, "This will do," passed his own selection of outer garments over the top of the screen. The emissary had chosen the mauve jacket, pale yellow breeches, flowered satin waistcoat, and new blue stock. These were among Robin's best and brightest garments, and he felt annoyed at being this offhandedly instructed to risk them. "What sort of business is it to be this time?" he enquired.

"Valderon the Scourge," said the Fairy's emissary, "wishes to claim the small country of Zarre, but his force of conquest will come to nothing unless he can capture the Crown of the Crescent Sun, without which no man can proclaim himself king over the Zarrians. Prince Gardannkar of Zarre is guarding the Crown in the strong-tower of Baltarth, but Baltarth is no longer secure. The Scourge is within a half-day's march of it, and the Crown must be moved to Denbaton, the walled town, for safety.

You are to carry this word to Gardannkar."

"Why me? Why not one of the Zarrians?"

"Did I not tell you that Valderon's army is on the march in Zarre? Do you think the Scourge would allow any native to pass uncaptured?"

Robin reminded himself that simply carrying a message through enemy lines was not quite the same as acting the spy. Not that Valderon was his enemy, except as Scourges in general are the enemies of free people in all worlds. Moreover, it was the Fairy who had originated the tactic. And while these thoughts crossed his mind, it also occurred to him that something in the words of her emissary was reminiscent of a dream he had read as a child, years ago, recorded in Uncle Mervyn's journal. In the dream, Sir Mervyn had worked some misdeed, but he could only write down fragments of it, and thus his nephew's recollection was doubly indistinct. No, the similarity was of course born of nothing more than the midnight's otherworldly mood.

"Won't I be conspicuous enough in my white skin," he asked, "without the aid of my best flowered waistcoat?"

"The more conspicuous, the better," replied the emissary. "What man of the Scourge's would suspect so peculiar a sight as yourself of carrying a message connected with this war? Are you ready?"

If the thin man had not been sent by the Fairy, Robin would have found his manner insupportably highhanded. "One moment," he said. He took his moment to return to the bed and bend over his slumbering wife. Gently he touched her silken ringlets, and when she did not wake, lightly planted a kiss on her smooth young forehead. He would have liked another moment, to take similar silent leave of his daughter May, but the sleep of infants, as he'd learned that afternoon, was too delicate a thing to risk breaking, even under the present mystic circumstances, and the emissary waxed impatient.

"Now, where is this message?" asked Robin, joining the cloaked figure. He expected a length of ribbon, the common Tehzarian writing material, but the emissary replied, "I will teach you the exact words on our way."

The bearded man led the householder downstairs, outside, and around the dwelling to the stile on the far side of the hedge. After turning the ring with the pale blue stone on his finger, he swung up the stile's bottom step, revealing a passage which Robin knew would be impossible for any ordinary Earth person to find unaided.

"What sort of folk are they? The Zarrians and Valderon's army?" he asked, remembering the cross-bred races of the Fludderfolk--Gnomes, Satyrs, Doylogs, part-Orgs and the like--among whom he had moved on his last mission.

"Simple Tehzarian humans, all of them," replied the emissary. "Like myself."

That meant there would be little difference between them and the Englishman, except that their skins, like the emissary's, would be green or possibly purple; many of them would have orange, white, or green hair, turning blue with age; their eyes might be pink, orange, or golden, and their hands would have three fingers instead of four. Otherwise, no difference.

"Are you quite sure," asked Robin, "that you really want so noticeable a specimen as myself to carry this message to Prince Gardannkar?"

"It was the Fairy who sent for you," replied the Tehzarian. "Trust her to know. They'll see nothing but a curiosity, and let it pass. You've nothing to fear

but a few stares and a jest or two."

* * *

"Nothing to fear but a few stares," Robin mused angrily. His face still burned from the thoroughness of the search made upon his person. Nor would the small Englishman have felt much inclined to attempt a spontaneous escape in the inadequate sleeveless knee-length tunic they had afterwards supplied him in place of his own clothes. He therefore thought the additional safeguards against escape as superfluous as they were uncomfortable: his ankles hobbled, his arms bound behind him, and a warrior at each side keeping grip on his wrists.

"You might at least have returned my boots," he complained. There had been hard gravel, and more burrs and prickles than quite desirable, between the outlying tent where he had been searched and this larger tent in what appeared to be the main camp.

The blue-bearded officer shrugged and grunted, almost as much conversation as he had indulged in since the capture. Then he motioned his men into the tent with their prisoner, and followed on their heels.

Two men were inside, a thin sallow-green one with hair and beard beginning to blue, and a muscular clean-shaven youth with a mane of thick orange hair. Behind them, away from the shaft of light shining in through the open doorway, an ancient bluish-green woman was stirring something in a steaming kettle over a snark-oil camp stove, and a savoury aroma filled the tent.

The grizzled officer held up his hand in a Tehzarian salute to the orange-haired youth. "An outlander found on the ridge above Poma, Valderon," he reported.

Robin started. So this golden-eyed boy was Valderon? He had somehow assumed his blue-bearded officer to be The Scourge. Well, hadn't Alexander conquered the Earth, for better or worse, before he was thirty years old?

But The Scourge seemed equally startled at sight of his prisoner. "The Demon!" exclaimed Valderon. "It's him!"

"I beg your pardon," replied the Englishman. "I am not a demon, nor do I appreciate being treated like one."

Valderon's sallow companion came forward and studied the prisoner by the light of the afternoon sun. "No," said he, "the face is rounder, the hair blacker and much longer and thicker, and the eyes brown rather than hazy green. There is a resemblance, but this is a different outlander, Prince."

The Scourge passed one three-fingered hand over his green forehead. "They all look alike to me. How many of them does Gardannkar have in his hire?"

"I beg to inform you," said Robin, "that I am a freehold farmer and not in anybody's hire." That was true enough. He might have a message for this Zarrian Prince, but there had been no word of payment, and without payment he could hardly be in the man's hire.

"If you're not working for Gardannkar's Zarrians," the young conqueror said sternly, "what were you doing on the ridge above Poma?"

"Trying to find my way," Robin stated truthfully.

"Your way to where?"

"Not to men who would treat me as if I were a spy."

"And are you a spy?"

"No," replied the Englishman, hoping they would not notice his instant of hesitation. A messenger was not a spy, after all.

Valderon sighed and passed his hand over his eyes again. "I lack the time and the patience for this game. What am I going to do?"

"Drink your soup," said the old woman, who all this time had stood in the background never ceasing to

stir the steaming kettle. She now dipped out a mugful and hobbled over to Valderon. From the authoritative way she pushed it into the youth's hand, and the obedient way he accepted it, Robin gathered she must be the Tehzarian equivalent of the conqueror's old nurse.

The sallow advisor and the blue-bearded captain helped themselves to mugs of the preparation. Apparently this soup was a popular nourishment in Valderon's army, and, by the smell of it, justly so. One of the warriors who help Robin stamped and remarked that fighting men needed to keep up their strength too, whereupon the crone brought them each a mugful. In order to free one hand apiece to take their soup, they each hooked an arm through one of the prisoner's, above the elbow, which he found even more disagreeable than the previous arrangement. "Where," he thought, "do they imagine I could run, here in the midst of their camp?" He hoped that the repast would soon be done with.

Meanwhile, the old nurse was looking him over, scratching her blue-green chin. After a moment she filled a sixth mug and fetched it up to him with the query, "Do you fancy granion soup, outlander?"

At sight of the liquid, Robin felt an involuntary spasm of horror and nausea. He had to remind himself that the blood-red granions were a type of native legume, and that Tehzarians, who had creme de menthe rather than claret in their veins, would not see anything gruesome in the soup's colour. "Thank you, madam," he apologized to the cook. "It has a most appetizing aroma, but I fear I have no appetite."

His politeness seemed to please the old dame. "Aye, maybe you're wise to put off eating until afterwards," she remarked, cheerfully ominous, and raised the mug to her own mouth.

Valderon meanwhile had lowered his. A smile of granion soup clung to his upper lip, giving him the appearance of a child vampire, before he wiped it away with the back of his hand.

"You haven't drunk the half," complained the old nurse.

"Leave it for later," replied the Scourge.

"And let it lose its warmth?" Grumbling, she poured the rest of Valderon's soup back into the kettle.

The Scourge turned to his prisoner. "In one word," said he, "have you any part in Gardannkar's effort against me?"

The question direct. Unfortunately, the perhaps over-scrupulous honesty of thirty-six years could not be cast away in a minute, even when the freedom of a nation depended on it. Robin attempted a compromise. "Do you bully every stranger--" he began, but the Scourge cut him off in short order.

"I tire of your phrases! I will take no word but 'Yes' or 'No'! Do you know anything of the Crown of the Crescent Sun?"

Finding himself unable to give the lie outright, the small Englishman stood silent. Valderon turned, paced to the end of his tent and back again, stood and fixed his golden eyes into Robin's. The prisoner dropped his gaze.

"It was one of your beige-skinned outland kind that first tricked her from me," said Valderon. "If you are guiltless, I'm sorry for you, but I must know, and with all speed possible."

"NO," thought Robin, as the two warriors plucked him off his feet and laid him face-down on the tent floor. "Oh, Lord, no, not again! How do these things happen to me?"

"I'd like to begin by taking a few drops of his blood," said the sallow man, fingering a small vial of some clear substance. "I've heard that their blood is... unusual."

"As you will, Doctor," replied the Scourge.

(Con't. on p. 16)

(Con't. from p. 7)

"Doctor?" exclaimed Robin.

"And a skillful one," said the sallow man. "So you need have no hopes of expiring with your secrets untold."

Apparently Tehzarian physicians swore nothing that answered to the Hippocratic Oath.

Robin felt one of the warriors press his ankles to the ground; the other was holding down his shoulders. Valderon's physician settled himself on the Englishman's legs and gripped his still-bound left hand. A sudden sharp stab in the ball of his thumb made Robin yelp but, to his relief, did not prompt him to utter his secret. He almost smiled at the predictable exclamations of astonishment that went up from the green-blooded natives of Tehzaria:

"The Demon!" cried the warrior at his head.

"His veins are full of granion soup!"

"Is the boy unwell?" fretted the old nurse.

"No, no, no," replied the physician, scraping something smooth along the pricked skin. Robin gathered he was collecting his sample of Earthman's blood. "This is its natural colour in these outlanders." He was whistling softly. The specimen must delight him.

Next the Englishman felt a puzzling, not overly unpleasant sensation as if the physician were cleaning his thumbnail preparatory to a manicure. "This may not prove unbearable," thought Robin, taking a little more heart.

But in the next few seconds it became apparent that the medical man had merely taken a considerate precaution against embedding foreign matter in the flesh. Robin didn't attempt to stifle his screams as the sharp point seared its trace beneath his thumbnail. "I've endured worse," he thought desperately, "twice--" But those earlier occasions had been in the past, and this was in the present. Besides, he had not, in fact, endured then, either.

"Remove the Crown of the Crescent Sun," he shrieked, "from--" From where? "from somewhere to--to Denbaton!"

"To Denbaton?" said the Physician. "She was not already in his walled town?"

"From where?" demanded the Scourge.

"I--don't know--I can't remember--if you'd let me think a little--"

The edge was withdrawn, the agony exchanged for an ugly throbbing. Baltarth. Yes, the emissary had said it often enough. Baltarth was the name of the stronghold where Prince Gardannkar was guarding the Crown to keep it from the Scourge. This would apparently be the most vital point of the message... and Valderon apparently needed the Crown to cement his authority here... perhaps Robin's short lapse of memory was fortunate... perhaps the freedom of the Zarrians might still be salvaged...

"Have you found your memory yet?" came Valderon's stern voice from above.

Robin moaned non committally. It was not enough. His nail was ablaze again in an instant, the edge driving still deeper. "Baltarth!" he sobbed. "From Baltarth!"

* * *

"At least," thought the Englishman, "the Fairy is not likely to summon me for any further errand after this." Keeping his eyes shut, he carefully sipped granion soup from the cup he held between his hands. Despite its aroma, it proved rather tasteless--no doubt its flavour was one of those which could only be appreciated by the Tehzarian tongue--but it was warm and fortifying.

He had to admit that the Scourge had treated him handsomely enough, once he had the message meant for Gardannkar. Robin's thumb, dressed and bandaged by Valderon's skillful physician, gave no more than passing twinges, he had been allowed to don his own clothes (a rather awkward business) before precautions were com-

pleted against his premature escape, and once the Scourge and his army were on their way to Baltarth, Valderon's old nurse, Tatta, and three chosen warriors would take the prisoner to a wizard's grandmother an hour's walk from here. This woman, a girlhood friend of Tatta's, possessed a talisman with the power of returning the Earthman to his own world and doorstep; both the Scourge and the prisoner considered it improbable in the extreme that Gardannkar would wish to bring Robin into Tehzaria again.

The thought crossed Robin's mind that it might be his duty to escape and warn Gardannkar while there was still time. But his captors had foreseen that possibility, and, with his legs bound from ankle to knee, each hand wound around (not tightly, but adequately) with cloth and tucked into a thumbless mitten of soft leather, Tatta's sharp eyes to watch him, the three warriors guarding her tent, the rest of the camp bustling all about them, and the way unknown beyond the camp, escape hardly seemed practicable. He found himself not ungrateful to Valderon's security measures. As matters stood, no matter which side triumphed, the Englishman would be in his own bed again within a few hours, and in the morning he would remember this only as a fragmentary dream, that being the nature of these Tehzarian adventures. Possibly an unpleasant dream, but nothing to fret his conscience.

True, the state of his conscience would not help the Zarrians, but one should be realistic. Would not a man with the power to conquer a country have the power to circumvent local custom in the matter of a traditional Crown, even if he could not lay hands on it? And, musing on this, Robin remembered that Valderon and his people had consistently employed the pronouns "she" and "her" when referring to the Crown of the Crescent Sun. No doubt this was local idiom, as the English applied the feminine pronoun to ships, the masculine, frequently, to swords. Still...

"Madam," enquired the Englishman politely, "would you be kind enough to tell me what, precisely, is the Crown of the Crescent Sun?"

"Little enough Gardannkar's hired lads are told, it seems," chuckled the old nurse. "The Crown is Valderon's betrothed."

"Oh," said Robin. "Thank you." Closing his eyes again, he drank the rest of his soup and set down the mug. He felt a sense of accomplishment at doing this neatly without the free use of his fingers.

"The Crown, then, would be Princess and rightful ruler of Zarre?" he queried.

Again Tatta registered amusement. "Zarre is Gardannkar's land, and welcome he is to it. Meldana's Queen of Larvanum, under the Crescent Sun. Where else?"

Where else, indeed? "And the Crescent Sun?"

"You are untravelled, boy. Haven't you ever heard of the mountain of almost pure dazbaeneum?"

"I see," said Robin. "Thank you, ma'am."

Dazbaeneum, no doubt, was a valuable metal in this world. He wouldn't try to remember the name of Meldana's kingdom. It was enough to piece together an overall concept of the situation.

The Crown--Valderon's bride-to-be--had been tricked away from the Scourge by an outlander. Long ago, Uncle Mervyn had done something romantic and wicked in a dream. For all the wicked and romantic deeds he did in his daily and nightly life, this one had been enough out of the ordinary that he had written down his recollections of it, fragmentary as they were. From Sir Mervyn's portrait, Robin knew there was indeed a family resemblance, and that his uncle fit the description suggested by the physician's remarks. The Crown, it seemed, had been kidnapped quite recently, while Sir

Mervyn had died more than thirty years ago, but time meant little to those beings who could translate one between the worlds of Tehzaria and Earth. Robin had shared his first Tehzarian adventure with three men from Medieval days (one of whom he would have been glad to see again, even in his present disgrace).

"Would it be too personal a question," he ventured, "to enquire why Valderon is called 'The Scourge'?"

"Because as soon as he came to power in Kerdan," laughed the nurse, "he took all the wealthsuckers who'd been wringing the country dry, squeezed the riches back out of them, and threatened to send 'em to the Fludder-folk if they tried it again."

"Thank you," repeated the Englishman. "I'd begun to suspect it was something on that order."

Experimentally, through the layers of cloth and mitten, he pressed the tip of his right middle finger to the nail of his left thumb, and pulled it away again at once. How could so small a member of the anatomy cause such acute discomfort? Suppose I had shown a bit of resolution, reflected the farmer, what might have Valderon's surgeon have done next? The thought was some salve for his vulnerability.

The testimony of Valderon's nurse, he mused on, may be neither quite impartial nor strictly reliable. Moreover, he reasoned with himself, what business is it of yours? You never sought to be thrust into this affair. May not any further intervention on your part prove inconvenient to them and possibly painful to yourself? You're safe enough now--let them wage their own warfare, while you're returned to home and family...

The Scourge burst into his old nurse's tent.

"Tatta, where did you put the banner of the Crescent Sun?"

"Yes, I thought you'd be wanting me again before you left, boy. The red chest with the manticore on the lid. Folded beneath your clean tunics to keep it fresh."

"Thanks, Secondmother." The young man deposited a hasty kiss on her ear. "One more mug of soup, and then on to Baltarth! Resting quiet, outlander?"

Robin, unsure whether he was being questioned as to his comfort or his conduct, lifted his mittened left hand and smiled sheepishly. Valderon nodded, took his mug of granion soup from the nurse, and pushed out again into the bustle.

Did Tehzarian wives administer curtain lectures? Robin found himself trying to picture the Crown of the Crescent Sun lecturing Valderon. Or Gardannkar. The images were indistinct, since the Scourge was the only one whose features he knew. In any event, an occasional curtain lecture was, perhaps, a reasonable price for a loving wife and family. The gentleman farmer caught his mind moving back to a time when it had seemed far from likely he would ever win his bride...

"Madam," he said suddenly to the nurse, "if it wouldn't be too much trouble, I believe I have something fairly vital to tell the Scourge before he marches against Baltarth."

* * *

The young conqueror listened, and rubbed the orange stubble that was beginning to grow on his chin, unshaven in the hurry to rescue his love. "You came to Zarre for no other reason than to spy for Gardannkar--"

"Not to spy," Robin corrected. "Merely to carry a message."

"To carry a message, then. You've admitted it was probably your own uncle who stole my betrothed for Gardannkar. Why shouldn't his knavery be carried in your granion-coloured blood? And why should you turn to my side now?"

"No man cares to be made a dupe of," Robin tried to explain, "and it seemed no more than fair to warn you that you may be marching into a trap at Baltarth. To

even matters, you see... To repair the damage we did you, if you will..."

"And not to repair the damage you did to Gardannkar's cause?" demanded Valderon.

Robin shifted uneasily. "I'd really rather not be tortured again," he pleaded. "If you'd prefer to ignore what I've just told you, ignore it, by all means. But if you were to force me to lie it away again," he went on, groping for words under Valderon's stare, "then it would come to the same thing as if you simply refused to believe me this time, you see, and it would be much quicker... and I seem to be very breakable," he finished lamely.

The Scourge once more fixed his golden eyes into those of his prisoner. This time Robin managed to meet his gaze without looking away. "I've been utterly open with you this time," he added. "You'd really gain nothing by torturing me again..."

The young conqueror began to pace his way around the tent.

* * *

The Tehzarian sky was deep orange, but the clouds buffing across it had much the same whiteness as those above Earth. A tall man appeared on the wall of the fortified town Denbaton. His spare frame was clad in a shirt of tiny glancing metallic scales. His hand, resting on the battlement, was highlighted by a jewel that glinted pale blue in the sun. His long purple hair and three-pointed beard, streaked with azure, blew freely in the warm winds. His orange eyes gazed down on the group below, travelling over the form that lay almost motionless on its pallet, flanked by Valderon's sallow physician and two of his prime warriors. The outlander's tunic was generously stained with crimson, his face and limbs bathed everywhere in the same colour.

"Did you dip him into a kettle of granion soup?" enquired the man on the wall.

"Do you know so little of your outlander friends," replied the physician, "that you fail to recognize the colour of their blood?"

The outlander jerked a little, tried to raise his head, and stretched out one arm in a pitiful attempt to point it at the man on the wall. "Gar--Gardann--kar?" he stammered, and at once fell back gasping, as if the effort had been too much.

"He had a message for you, Prince," said the physician sardonically.

"He held out well," observed Gardannkar. Had a note of surprise slipped into his carefully neutral voice?

"Not very," answered the physician, "but he foolishly tried to trick us. We had to be sure. Would you hear his message, Prince?"

The man on the wall shrugged. "Its usefulness seems to be destroyed."

"It is," returned the physician, "but the Scourge is generous enough to let his enemies know what was meant for their knowledge. The message was: 'Remove the Crown of the Crescent Sun from Baltarth to Denbaton.' Clever to hide her in the strongtower, Prince, guessing we would expect you to have her in your walled town with you, but the reward of your cleverness is that Valderon and his men will almost have reached Baltarth at this hour. Do you want your outlander?"

"It seems," said the Prince, "that his weakness has lost me the Crown."

The crimson-covered figure struggled up again, this time jerking its shoulders and chest a few inches off the pallet. "Prince!" it choked. "Don't abandon--" Then with a strangled cough it fell back and lay motionless.

The physician bent over the prone form, then dropped a blue cloth upon its face. "I think he would be of no more use to you now, Prince," said he with a coldness that matched Gardannkar's own.

"It seems he was of little use to me before," replied Gardannkar. "But within three minutes, we march to meet the Scourge at Baltarth. Valderon may regret it, Doctor, that he let me hear this message, even at this late hour. And if you linger at my gates, we march over you on our way."

At a sign from the physician, the two warriors lifted the pallet and started back with it along the road. The physician remained long enough to throw a last taunt up at the Prince. "Search your stomach, Gardannkar, before you march towards Baltarth. Better lose Meldana than all of Zarre!"

* * *

"Had you seen him before Gardannkar," said the physician, "you might have thought again before trusting to his honesty. Even I pitied him for wounds I'd never given him. A rare piece of deceit."

"I'd rather think of it," Robin protested, "as play-acting."

"Think of it however you will," laughed Valderon, hugging his bride with one arm and waving a leg of roast galkfowl with the other. "I guessed a man so reluctant to lie forthright in the press was not likely to come back afterwards on his own with a whole chain of falsehood. Whatever this play-acting was outside Denbaton, Doctor, I'll wager he never threw a lie at Gardannkar's ear."

"No," mused the physician, fingering his beard, "nor, I think, did I. But it served us well, Scourge."

Gardannkar, marching out of the walled city to watch the tower of Baltarth cave in on Valderon with his men and to pick off any survivors, had met the Scourge in force on the way. "We gave him a fairer battle than he'd wished to give us," Valderon observed; but it was not an overwhelmingly bloody battle, for most of Gardannkar's men took the first reasonable pretext to surrender, and were now drinking and singing with Valderon's army around the evening campfires.

The commander of Baltarth, dutiful but understandably nettled at Gardannkar's orders to blow himself up and his handful of men along with the Scourge, surrendered at first news that his Prince was taken. Denbaton likewise capitulated without loss of time, and the Zarrian Princess Deranial, Gardannkar's niece, along with an escort of noble fighters, had brought both the Crown and the surrender to Valderon's camp.

Robin had not seen their entry, being at that time engaged in the bath tent. He was not presented to the ladies until later, when he found himself grateful for the first time to be in his best clothes on this adventure, grateful also that his stock, impossible to tie correctly, did well enough tucked untied into his collar. Unaccustomed though he was to green-complexioned beauty, it appeared to him that the Crown of the Crescent Sun might well be compared to a Tehzarian Helen of Troy, while the Zarrian Princess who had befriended her in her captivity, though probably lacking her loveliness, had something in her golden eyes and firm chin suggestive of Good Queen Bess. Valderon and Meldana intended to leave Zarre under a sovereign chosen by the principal Zarrians, and Deranial bid very fair to be their choice. Robin wondered how long it would have taken her to make such an opportunity for herself had it not been presented to her.

They were a small, select, and comparatively decorous party that gathered in Valderon's tent: The Scourge and his bride, his physician and old nurse, the blue-bearded captain and three other of his most intimate officers, and the Zarrian Princess. Although eager to return home, the Englishman was sensible of the courtesy extended to him in his inclusion among them.

"My great fear," he remarked, "was that Gardannkar might have more magic to put against us."

"Little chance," winked Valderon, "or he wouldn't

have needed to set up his trap as he did. Even the gunflour that was supposed to cave Baltarth in on us, he'd gotten from someone in your world."

"The Princes of Zarre have had possession of the Transalt Amulet for a hundred phoenix lifetimes," said Deranial, fingering the pale blue stone in the ring that now graced her hand. "Sometimes it has been misplaced for generations, and sometimes it has been badly used, as it was to bring your uncle here, and Hawks with his gunflour. It will be used more wisely hereafter."

Robin wondered if Hawks had been Fawkes, but he did not correct their terminology. Gunflour or gunpowder, what difference was there if they were to import no more of the stuff? He thought wistfully that a few sky-rockets and Katherine wheels would have added a pretty touch to the celebrations, but he lacked exact knowledge of how to manufacture them, and so the barrels of gunflour, at his suggestion, were to be sunk in one of the deepest parts of a nearby river.

"What will you do with Gardannkar?" he asked.

"Give him his choice," answered the Scourge.

"He can be imprisoned for life in Baltarth, or in one of my strongholds, or he can go to the Fludderfolk."

"I'd choose the Fludders," remarked Robin. Unaccountably relieved, he attacked his cut of roast meat, flattering himself that he was making excellent progress in the management of his knife and the small pronged cooking implement he had borrowed to use as a fork, which last was a piece of tableware unknown in this land.

"And yet I gambled in trusting you, outlander," said Valderon, watching him. "How many, in your place, would have been more interested in taking revenge on us?"

Robin glanced at his bandaged thumb and shrugged. "I ought to have guessed earlier how matters stood. Gardannkar claimed he'd come to me from the Fairy, and assured me you would let me pass unmolested as a harmless curiosity. It became obvious almost at once that he had been less than candid with me. In fact, you knew he'd already employed men of my race, one of my own uncles among them, and I was therefore chosen for the family resemblance, and then attired as conspicuously as he could arrange, on purpose to insure my capture and interrogation."

Gratified at their attention, and secretly thinking himself more clever than he pretended, the Englishman took a sip of blue wine and continued, "There was also something extremely unsatisfactory, once I came to consider it, in his bringing me to exactly the right ridge at exactly the right hour to meet your vigilant and competent patrol within a few minutes of my arrival." He nodded to the officer, who acknowledged the compliment with a contented grunt.

"It's true the Transalt Amulet will take us to any era of your world's history," said the Zarrian Princess, "but we can only return to the same day we left. It must have been partly chance that you were taken so soon. However, the Amulet does allow us a rather wide freedom of place, even on our side. Gardannkar would have departed from the town, brought you back to Poma's ridge, where he knew Valderon's warriors would be moving on guard, then returned for a moment to your world and slipped from there to Denbaton again."

"Of course," said Robin, "I had no proof until I saw him on the wall that the emissary who had taught me the message for Gardannkar really was Gardannkar himself, but the other points were telling enough that I should've seen the trap long before I did, had I not been gulled into imagining myself on the Fairy's mission to save a free people from a land-hungry invader."

"And how did you determine, sir, that this time it was in fact no work of mine?" enquired a voice from one

corner of the tent. Turning, they beheld the Fairy herself, in her customary dark robes, stepping out of the shadow. Most of them jumped to their feet, but, brushing aside ceremonial, she took a place amongst them and repeated her question. A citizen of both worlds, her skin was a lighter beige than the Englishman's, her hair white around her ageless face, her hands four-fingered, and her eyes, at this moment, amused.

"It hardly seemed your way of doing things, Lady," Robin tried to explain. "I suppose it would have been less convincing for them to have taken me with a written message, but on the whole, there seemed too much cruelty as well as too much deceit in the scheme for it to have been yours."

"Beware of flattery, sir," smiled the Fairy. "As it happens, you were right. I learned only an hour ago of this plot, and Gardannkar's misuse of my name. Give me your hand, sir. No, your left hand."

Mingled with the relief was just a touch of regret in losing his badge so quickly; but it would facilitate his use of his eating utensils. Valderon's physician, having begged the favour of unwrapping the bandage, expressed a lively envy of the newcomer's healing power, which she accepted with tolerance.

Somewhat later, as the meal was concluding, and before the wine cups could be refilled again, the Fairy fixed her eye on the Zarrian Princess. "We must speak of the amulet, Deranial."

"By rights it belongs to the rulers of Zarre," demurred the Princess, "and I have not yet been chosen; I am merely holding it in trust. However, we can speak of it whenever you will, Lady."

"Tomorrow, then. For this evening, I'll relieve you of the task of seeing our Earthman home."

"That task would have been pleasure," said Deranial. "Still," she added politely, "you have my gratitude, Lady."

Robin, seizing on his cue, rose to take his leave. Bowing to the two Tehzarian ladies, he took the hand of each in turn and kissed it respectfully. "A custom of my world," he explained.

Somewhat to his consternation, the Crown and the Princess, acting as if by common assent, promptly sprang up on either side of him and planted their kisses on each ear. "A custom of our world," explained Meldana, crying the next moment, "Why, what've we done to the outlander?"

"Nothing at all," Deranial answered as she calmly took her seat. "He's only blushing. They turn that shade because their blood is the colour of granion soup."

"And a handy thing, as it turned out," said Robin, recovering his composure. "What else could you have smeared me with for my appearance before the town?"

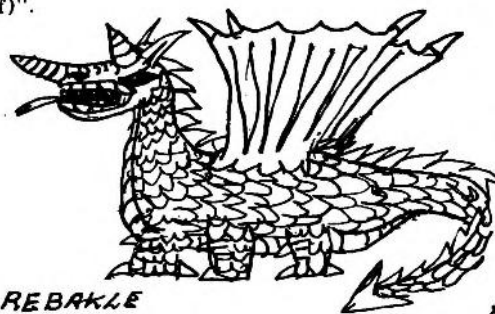
"What's that you say?" Rose murmured drowsily.

"Nothing," replied her husband. He could not have slept long, for the clock in the downstairs hall was only striking ten, and yet he'd had time for a rather long and complex dream, which had dissipated in the moment of awakening, to leave little but a sense of adventure, an impression that somehow Uncle Mervyn had been involved, and the image of a dainty three-fingered green hand wearing a ring with a pale blue stone. "At least, I don't think I said anything just then," he added.

"Very well," yawned his wife. "You shall be forgiven."

Forgiven for what? Ah, yes, he dimly remembered, as if it had been very long ago, that he'd been curtain-lectured that evening, but the smart had somehow been erased in his sleep and dreaming. A dream, he mused comfortably, as his wife rolled to his side and he folded her in his arms, could be a very pleasant thing.

(Further adventures of Robin in Tehzaria may be found in Rampant Guinea Pig #2; the tale is entitled "The Rebakle (and the part Robin played in the slaying thereof)").



Editorial

To all Mythril readers:

As you know, subscriptions to Mythril have been \$2.50 for four issues. Inflation has compelled us to discontinue Mythril as a subscription magazine. There will, however, be a new fiction 'zine under new editorship, published annually beginning in June of 1981. New editor Gary Myers has tentatively titled it Terra Incognita. He is actively looking for material. His home address is 6153 McKinley Ave., South Gate, CA 90280. This issue, therefore, is Mythril the Last.

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I want to say briefly that I hope you have enjoyed reading Mythril as much as I have enjoyed getting it out to you. I apologize for the long delay since #7, but as you now know, (I say with everything crossed!) this final issue was worth all that went into it. My deep thanks go to our contributors, both writers and illustrators, to Dynamic Graphics, Inc., of Peoria, Illinois for their permission to use the front-cover artwork; to Gary Myers for his patient and good-humored help; and to you for supporting Mythril. And I'll be looking forward to Terra Incognita next year. Thank you, everyone, and Namarie.