

BLUE BOOK

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MAGAZINE

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The short stories and novels herein are fiction and intended as such. They do not refer to real characters or actual events. If the name of any living person is used, it is a coincidence.

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Up, Red Dragon!

CAPTAIN ARTORIUS—KING ARTHUR TO BE—STOOD ACCUSED OF THE WORST CRIME KNOWN TO FIGHTING MEN. "A MAN LIVES AFTER HIS LIFE, BUT NOT AFTER HIS HONOR," DECLARED CAPTAIN ECLANIUS, THE PICT WHO ACCUSED HIM. "A WARRIOR OUGHT NOT TO OUTLIVE HIS LORD."

by PAUL JOHNSTONE



STANDING erectly in the purple-draped Presence Chamber, young King Arthur saluted the aged Wizard Merlin. Throned in his great chair, Merlin's golden diadem flashed as he responded with a curt nod. "Speak, Captain Artorius!" he said.

Neither man would have recognized himself under the familiar names we have given to them. To a Briton of that year, our A.D. 504 (though the computations upon which the monk Dionysius the Needy was then engaged in far-distant Constantinople would not reach Britain for centuries) the aged man upon the throne was Ambrosius Aurelianus, Great King over the many kings of the "successor-states" of Roman Britain. To his Welsh-speaking subjects of the West, he was Emrys Wledig, the war-lord, who battled year after year to preserve what a century of isolation and incessant barbarian attack had left of the wealth and pride of Kelto-Roman Britannia. . . .

A Roman of ancient lineage, whose ancestors had held high office under the Empire, King Ambrosius did not suspect that some of his more backward subjects, awed by the splendor of his court, had begun to confuse him with the half-mythical priest-kings of Stonehenge. In time, Martinus Ambrosius Aurelianus, named for two saints of Latin Christendom, would become in tradition Merlin Ambrose the wizard, son of a demon father, whose spells alone marshaled the blue stones and erected the great gray trilithons on Salisbury Plain. . . . It was well that the proud and pious old king did not know!

The broad-shouldered young man who stood before the King in the white linen tunic, baggy blue woolen

trousers and tight leather boots of a cavalryman, yet carried no sword at his side—he would have known himself as Arthur, or Artorius in the formal Latin of the king's court. But he was no king, and no king's heir. True, his father had been an underking in Cornwall, years ago, lord of two hilltop forts and a few hundred acres of barren moor, before he fell under the sword of an Irish invader. Reared in exile, Arthur had entered Ambrosius' service as the esquire-like *uassos* of his foster-brother Cavo Cupitianus (who would be transmuted by passing centuries into Sir Kay). They had gained the high honor of admission to the bodyguard of Deogratias, one of the warlike sons of Ambrosius. Both had won fame and spoil as duelists, in the single combats preceding every Dark Age battle. The cheerful brown-haired broad-chested Arthur had found greater favor with his superiors than his tall, surly foster-brother. In swift promotion necessitated by constant losses in battle, Arthur had become Captain of Prince Deogratias' bodyguard. But now the fighting-season was over; the severed head of the Prince lay in a fresh grave outside the Roman walls of Corinium,* and Arthur stood accused of the worst crime known to fighting men.

FACING the white-haired king, stern in his grief, with his circle of solemn councilors and grim-faced guards, Arthur spoke. Low at first, his voice gained power until it boomed through the high-ceilinged hall: "O King Ambrose, when Deogratias led us to meet the Saxons outside Portus Magnus,** I was the Captain of his guard, his house-host. Charging knee to knee,

we rode into the Saxon wedge. . . . As I had counseled him, they were too many for us. We broke their front, only to be hemmed in. The infantry saw our plight, lost heart and fled. Then was true fighting found! The heathen spearmen thrust at our steeds. Still we kept driving forward, making for their White Horse banner. Spears broken, we drew swords. I struck and struck until my blade was sprung, its tang rattling loose inside the hilt.

"**P**RINCE DEOGRATIUS scanned the battle, and saw we fought alone. He gave orders to turn, and break a path of escape, those unhorsed running beside the riders. After we won free, they would pause, and some ride double. My horse slain, I ran beside the Prince, my shield to his right knee. That was no easy journey! Sometimes my shield helped the Prince; sometimes his sword cut a path for me. We won free—and the Prince toppled against my shield! I saw his gilded saddle, all red with blood. His thigh—his left thigh, away from me—had been chopped open by a Saxon *seax*. His blood was a torrent.

"I laid him on the ground, covered by my shield. The guards built a fence of shields about us. With the Saxons charging, howling, I tried to stanch his blood. I was too late. . . . He opened his eyes. 'No use, host-comrade,' he said. 'Don't let the heathen have my head to stick up on their bloody pillar—cut it off! Cut off my head and take it home to Dad. Tell him it was a good show. . . . Yes, and take my sword. Little Romanus—' " He died.

"O King Ambrose, it is woe to tell what I told you before! There was no time and no help. With my sword I cut off my chief's head, and wrapped it in his red cloak, and hung it from

* Cirencester, Gloucestershire.

** Portchester by Portsmouth, Hampshire.



his saddle. I sheathed my own bent sword and took his—I should have taken the golden baldric and sheath, but I did not think of that then. I put my thighs on that blood-wet saddle, and with the Prince's sword cut us a way to freedom. Three hundred we rode into battle, and two hundred we came out.

"I laid the sword and the head of Deogratias before you, and told the tale as I tell it now. . . . When our chief was dead, we might have charged back into the Saxon host, and died to the last man. I did not give that order. If that is fault, it is mine, for the guards never lost courage. I did what my chief ordered. Yet am I alive, he in death. That is the reproach that is mine in every street, in every wine-shop. . . . While my own sword is being repaired, at the shop of Belinic the Master-smith, I have gone swordless, that I might not break your good laws against brawling. Now one of my own comrades has called me coward and traitor and no-man, in the ears of many. I have borne enough, O King! It is my right—give me men's truth!"

THE King gazed at him bleakly. "Both sides must be heard, before judgment is given. Think well on what you ask, Captain Artorius! Think on what I have spoken to you, of Britain's plight, her need of every fighting man to stem the heathen tide. . . . Now, Captain Eclanius, what is your word?"

A lean, hard-featured man stepped forward. Under his kilted tunic, his hairy legs were bare, and bare his splay-toed feet. Yet there was a torque of twisted gold strands about his neck, and massive bronze bracelets aflame with the reds and yellows of Keltic enamel-work decked his muscular

arms. His dark hair had reddish glints, and his cheekbones were large. Beneath them his face tapered rapidly to the chin, aggressively jutting its goatish beard. He was Echlann Gall, the Daring.

He spoke in Latin redolent of heather and peat smoke. "It is a Pict I am, out of Alban, and I say what my tribe says—*A man lives after his life, but not after his honor.* That man left his honor at Portus Magnus! A warrior ought not to outlive his lord."

King Ambrose gestured impatiently with gold-headed scepter. "We have no men to throw away in vain gestures of chivalry. And beyond that, Artorius obeyed his leader."

Echlann's hard mouth twisted. "And did he, now? Who save himself heard those words? What if he needed horse and sword to make his own escape? What if it was he cut Deogratias down?"

Arthur whirled on him, with fists clenched. His deep voice throbbed with anger. "You say I did that—you, who were not there!"

"Aye!" Mockingly, Echlann wagged his head. "I was not there. I would not know. But it is the men were there who say you had sharp words with your chief, ere battle was joined, and you against joining it. Now Deogratias is dead, and yourself say 'twas your sword lifted the head of him. You, the Captain of his house-host, have outlived your lord, and your honor is dead with him! That is what my mouth says, and my hand will make it good!"

"And I say—" Arthur checked his furious outburst, glanced at the King. "That is the way it is, O King Ambrose! He and his cronies cast those words at me, day by day. I obey your laws, and my own men begin to doubt

me, as I bear these insults. Give us men's truth!"

King Ambrose sat in his royal chair, lean and old and grim. He spoke at last. "Captain Eclanius, you have served us well. We can overlook much from an old comrade who stood beside us at Mount Damen, when we taught Octa, Hengist's son, the taste of defeat. . . . Much, but not this slandering of another brave man! Deogratias was my son, not yours! This is my judgment: here and now, you will make full apology, or—leave my service forever."

ECHLANN started violently. His deep-set fiery eyes glared at the King. "A pity your wits are dimming in your old age, King! A pity your old eyes can't see—I will not tarnish the honor of a chief of Alban by asking any man's pardon for speaking truth in deaf ears."

"Is that your answer, Captain Eclanius?" asked the King.

"It is that!"

"Then are you no man of mine! Honorius, see that he and his men are given their full pay, as they surrender the arms we have given them. . . . Eclanius, you have until tomorrow night to leave Corinium, and three days beyond that to be out of my realm."

"No! O King Ambrose, do you not do that!" Arthur broke in. "The Picts are our best regiment of foot. If one must go into exile, my going will do the army less harm. I have no following—"

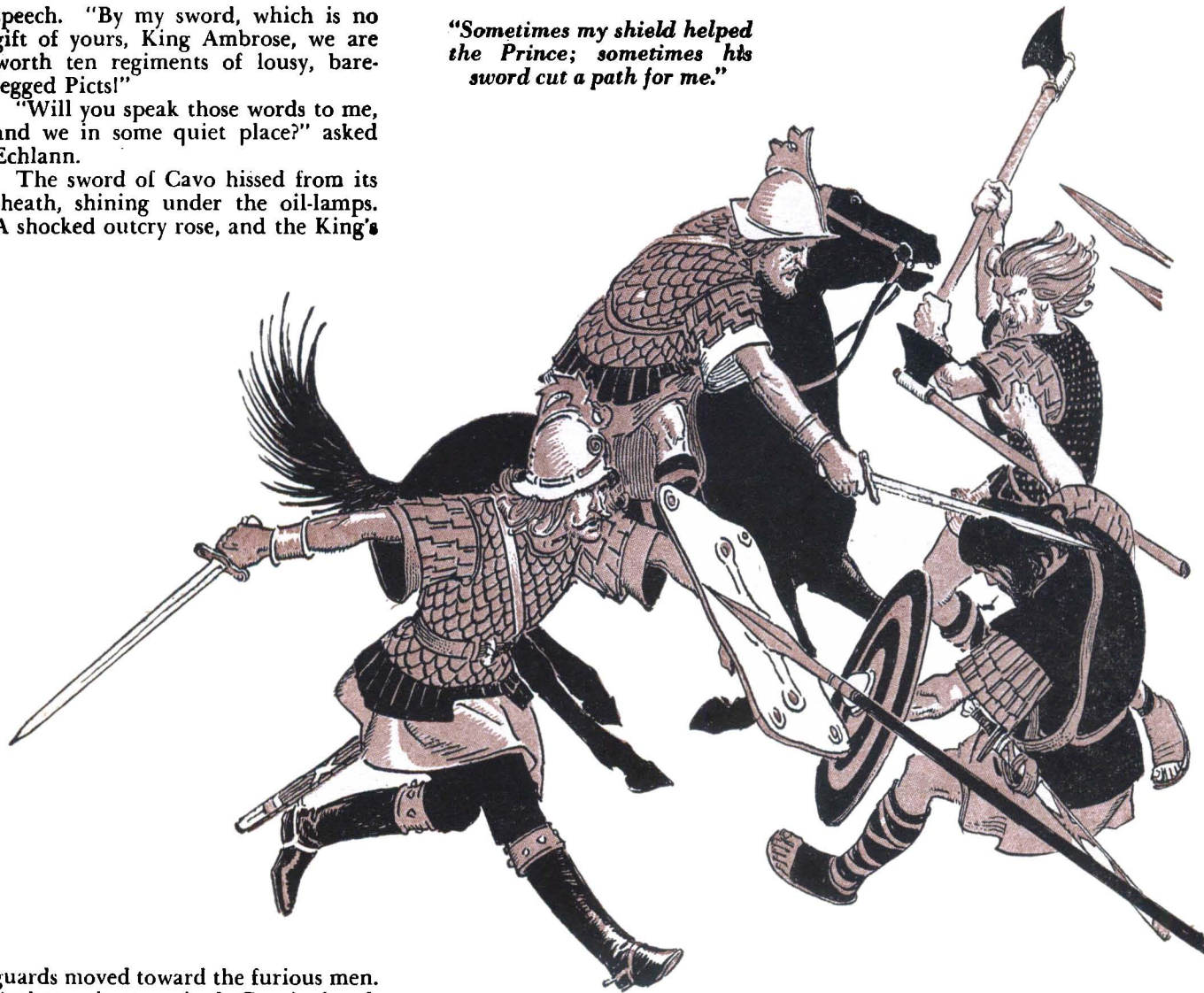
"You have me, and every true man of the Prince's house-host!" Cavo Cupitianus, tall and terrible in his rage, laid hand to sword. "If Arthur goes into exile, it is we go with him!" He had lapsed into the common British

speech. "By my sword, which is no gift of yours, King Ambrose, we are worth ten regiments of lousy, bare-legged Picts!"

"Will you speak those words to me, and we in some quiet place?" asked Echlann.

The sword of Cavo hissed from its sheath, shining under the oil-lamps. A shocked outcry rose, and the King's

"Sometimes my shield helped the Prince; sometimes his sword cut a path for me."



guards moved toward the furious men. Arthur, closer, seized Cavo's hand, drove his foster-brother's blade back into its sheath with a penetrating clang. He looked toward the King. "O King Ambrose, this quarrel is becoming a festering wound, deadly to the armies of Britain! Let it be lanced now—let me meet Echlann, life to life, and heaven to judge between us!"

"It is my sword will judge and doom you!" spoke Echlann. "King, let me prove what a coward he is!"

The old King's eyes were wise and weary. "You are children both. Echlann, for ten years have you taken the prize for swording in my games; this spring you all but lost it to Artorius. Jealousy is an evil thing! Artorius, you have lost no honor in my eyes; you are still the most brilliant of my pupils, an old head on young, strong shoulders. Yet I know it is bitter to you that you are an exile, rather than a prince in your own land, as you would be if I had been free to go to your father's aid.

"A firm man, with a clear conscience can ignore the sneers of the envious—if these things hurt you, it is because they are blows on an old sore. Pride, too, is an evil thing! Remember that Deogratias lies unavenged, that Por-

tus Magnus is Saxon ground tonight. Is this the time for the defenders of Christendom to rend each other? It is my word to you both—clasp hands and forget this foolish quarrel."

"The word is gone forth from him," said Arthur steadily. "In far cities they will hear the tale of my shame, which is untrue. Let Echlann stand before the whole host and confess he spoke without knowledge and without truth. Then will I clasp his hand."

"Let my tongue wither, ere it speaks such trash!" growled Echlann.

Ambrose the King shook his hoar head. "So we waste strength while the Saxon prospers! Now must judgment be given. . . . To send one of you into exile will only fan the flame that is kindled between your partisans. To send both into exile is to see you fight in another place. Either way, is but loss to Britain's cause. There is an old saying, and it the wise one: *Not good the act of one sword, that will not send two others back into the sheath. . . . Aye, you shall have 'men's truth,' sword to sword, that no others*

need draw blade in your behalf! So, for jealousy and pride I must lose either an old comrade or a keen pupil. Let this be known to both of you—our gravest displeasure rests upon you for this thing!"

Silently, Arthur and Echlann lifted right arms in the Roman salute.

II

MUFFLED in their woolen cloaks against the November chill, the folk of Corinium streamed from their city's bastioned gates toward the tiered seats of the "Round Table"—the ancient Roman amphitheater, which now served as an exercise-ground for the soldiers of Ambrose, as well as a public meeting-place for open-air feasting and ceremonies. To be a "Knight of the Round Table" was to be one of the mailed horsemen who strove for the rich prizes offered each spring by Ambrosius in his great Games. Thus the bloody sports of heathen Rome, in a nobler shape, served the "last Roman," Ambrose Aurelian, as a means of attracting soldiers to his standard, and hardening them for rougher work

ahead. Here we find an explanation of the reckless chivalry, the adventurousness, the incessant mimic combats which characterize in tradition this lost life of Christian, sub-Roman Britain.

At Caerleon, deep in the West, where the Saxon never made the land his own, the circular Roman arena is still the "Round Table." Even so, a duel to the death between warriors of fame was a rarity. Save for a few monks and nuns, rigidly debarred from such performances by their vows, the whole population of Corinium was there. They did not fill the sloping seats nearly to capacity, for like all other Roman-built cities of Britain, Cirencester had suffered from the century of anarchy that preceded and followed the withdrawal of the Legions. Yet the eastern cities—London and the rest—had suffered so much more that Corinium's two or three thousand inhabitants made her probably the most populous city of the island, as in Roman times she had been second only to London. Certainly she was the chief remaining stronghold of Romano-British culture. There might still be seen the spotless togas of the self-conscious town councilmen, the staves and short swords of the civic police, the top-heavy coiffures of jeweled debutantes and dowagers, the rouged faces of the *meretrices*, the crunching hobnailed boots of the Roman foot-soldier. They were all there, clustered about the inner barrier, leaning forward, tensely waiting.

IN his royal box, beneath an awning of purple velvet, upheld by gilded spears, flanked by guardsmen in molded breastplates of gilded bronze, King Ambrose lounged unhappily. Bending his diadem-decked snowy head, he spoke first with an eager-faced boy of ten squirming in the seat at his left, then with the stately, purple-robed blonde girl at his right. They were his grandson, Romanus, only son of slain Deogratias, and his youngest child, still unmarried, Flavia Aurelia. The boy was frankly delighted, Aurelia ostentatiously bored.

In the unchanged ritual that still precedes a major prize-fight, publicity seekers took advantage of the gathering to be introduced with appropriate fanfare. Sidonius the Cantian would present his famous trained-bear act in the same arena the next holiday; a town councilman nervously read announcements concerning new penalties for delinquent taxpayers. He departed hastily, followed by hisses and flying garbage. Tedion the Dumnonian, a squat, grinning fellow of enormous width, challenged all comers at wrestling, backing himself with a side bet of six hundred minimi—the tiny, seed-like bronze coins of

free Britain; a wandering bard from the North Country bawled forth his stereotyped praises of the city and its valiant, nobly generous inhabitants and valiant, nobly generous king, then dropped his tiny, twanging harp to scramble for tossed coins; three jugglers, clearly suffering from hangovers, were hooted and pelted into flight; John the Assyrian, graduate astrologer from Babylon, newly arrived in the city, proclaimed himself able to predict the futures of noble and commoner, man and beast (for the benefit of those who played the horse-races) at unprecedentedly reasonable rates. He was heard out in awed silence. Then at last, a trumpet-call!

Gates at opposite ends of the arena swung open, and the crowd roared as from each a horseman came trotting easily toward each other, long spears held shoulder-high, points slanted forward and down. Turning, they faced the royal box, spears lifted overhead in salute.

Lowering his trumpet, the royal herald bellowed out the names and rank of the principals, with the cause of their quarrel; he reminded all present that they were bound to watch without interference, and to accept the result as the judgment of heaven. The duel would begin on horseback, but might continue on foot. All tactics were fair, and the winner could give or refuse mercy as he would. . . . A wave of the king's scepter cut short his oration, and sent Arthur and Echlann to their "corners."

As the riders waited with poised spears, the throng above buzzed with comment and disputation. Leather-lunged bookmakers offered three to two on Echlann. The Pict rode armorless save for his jockey-cap helm (the peak worn backward) and round parrying-targe of bronze; so had he always ridden to victory, depending on catlike speed, cunning and endurance to worst his armored foes. Bare of shaggy limbs, reddish beard jutting, the Pict bestrode his restless black pony with the complete confidence of a proven champion.

Across the stretch of hard-pounded turf, Arthur was mounted on a heavy gray stallion. The burnished scales of his mail clothed him in blue-white radiance. His shield and red-plumed helm were white-enameled. The repaired sword hung from a shoulder-baldric, in a sheath of shining bronze. His baggy blue trousers and yellow jack-boots contrasted with Echlann's bare limbs, beneath tartan kilt and bull's-hide cuirass. Arthur's feet were spurred, his horse equipped with stirrups and high-peaked wooden saddle—all the new-fangled devices of cavalry warfare introduced to Europe by the Huns about A.D. 375, and eagerly appropriated by Roman lead-

ers like Aetius, and Ambrosius, who while in exile had served his apprenticeship in war under the conqueror of Attila. Like a true Roman *catafract*, Arthur carried the ten-foot stabbing lance, while Echlann grasped three slender, needle-pointed darts. They typified eras a thousand years apart—Arthur the incoming mailed chivalry that would dominate Europe until the days of the longbow, Echlann the ancestral Kelt of the pre-Roman Iron Age.

"It's murder!" protested a visitor. "The armored man on his big horse will ride right over that poor fool on his little nag."

"Keep your tunic on, fellow!" laughed a native Corinian. "We've buried a score of armored men on big horses who tried to ride over Echlann Gall."

Rising from his seat, King Ambrose lifted high his gold-headed scepter. The crowd-noise faded. A brief, flat trumpet-note. Arthur's long spear lifted, poised. Held overhead, thumb almost touching his mailed shoulder, the Briton's lance would stab forward and down, unlike a medieval knight's couched weapon. . . . "Three to two on Echlann!" a bookmaker's voice broke the momentary silence.

The King's scepter flashed and fell. The trumpet brayed.

GRAY stallion and shaggy black pony trotted out. As they neared their meeting, the pace quickened. Shields were lifted. The crowd gave tongue. Under the scale-mail, Arthur's wide shoulders twisted for the lunge that would transfix the man on the pony—Echlann threw his dart, straight at the broad chest of the gray.

Alert for that move, Arthur's trained wrist dipped his long spear. The long blade rang as it turned the Pict's dart. Recovering quickly, the Briton stabbed at his foe as they flashed past. His steel grazed the back of Echlann's leather cuirass. "*Alban a-bu!*" exulted the Pict.

The nimble-footed pony turned more swiftly than the huge stallion. Arthur swung the gray around—and Echlann's second dart went home. Screaming in pain, the tall horse reared high, fell crashing. A cloud of dust puffed up under floundering hoofs, suddenly stilled.

Slipping to the turf and drawing sword, Echlann trotted toward his fallen foe. Thrown free by the dying horse, but half-stunned by that fall, Arthur lurched up, barely in time. His shield rang. He struck back, felt his blade bend on the Pict's heavy helm. The crowd screamed. Echlann Gall went backward, three staggering strides, shook his head and showed white teeth in a dazed grin.

Quick as Echlann had been to seize his advantage, Arthur followed, sword

upswing. . . . As one man, the watchers leaped up, screaming astonishment. The thirty shining inches of steel that was Arthur's sword-blade arched gracefully through the air to fall a hundred feet behind his mailed back. He struck down, then stared at the empty, useless hilt in his hand. Instantly, he knew—*Belinic the Master-smith had tightened the loose hilt, overstrained the tang, the blade's tail, inside the grip. It had broken, leaving him—*

In swift rage, the Briton smashed shield to shield, struck with the heavy hilt at Echlann's hairy face. The Pict ducked, rocked as the hilt-knob clanged on his helm, recovered, slashed. Deep went his blade into the rivet-strengthened poplar wood of Arthur's protecting shield. Quickly the Cornishman tried to grapple, but Echlann wrenched his sword free. They rocked apart.

"*Cuttell! Cuttell!*" roared Cavo Cupitianus. "Your dagger!" His straining voice penetrated the uproar. Arthur, his head clearing, drew his heavy-blade dagger, and sheltered behind his deep-gashed shield.

Echlann Gall did not rush. Under shaggy brows, his keen eyes were sea-blue, sea-cruel. Amid reddish shag, his teeth gleamed whitely. "You're done, Cornishman! Down on your belly—do me sword-point homage, and maybe I'll let you live."

Sword-point homage. . . . Arthur knew its meaning, though he had never seen that brutal rite of subjection enacted. It was an old thing, old and cruel and evil. Stripped naked, the beaten suppliant crawled to his conqueror's feet, then rolled on his back, arms outstretched and mouth open to receive the victor's sword or lance-point. Teeth clenched on the steel, a foot planted on his chest, he must undergo a long litany of humiliation and give appropriate answer by gesture of his hands, or die at the whim of the man above him. To do sword-point homage would in itself remove him from the company of self-respecting men. Yet, what other chance was there? A short dagger, against the best swordsman of all the armies of Britain! He was half-stunned, weak, sick, eyes blurred, his armor a crushing weight. It would be life, life. He was young to die. Honor, what was it, after all?

Beyond the Pict's mocking face, Arthur's shock-dazzled gaze focused on a purple-draped box, on the worn face of an old man, brows wrinkled under circling gold. Ambrose the king was leaning forward, staring tensely. The old king, who had given him his chance. . . .

"While I live, I am not beaten," said Arthur to Echlann Gall.

The Pict glared at him, as if puzzled. "Then it is your shame and not

mine, for this unequal fight. Glad I am you gave me refusal, for now the fury of slaughter is on me. *Alban, Alban, Alban a-bu!*"

The poplar shield grew splintered and blotched. Chalk flew from its fittings. The dagger turned a stroke from Arthur's face, from his neck, but Echlann would never let him close. They fought till breath failed them both, rested and fought again, rested and fought. . . . Slowly, slowly, Arthur wearied under the weight of his mail. Sweat streamed down his reddened face, into his eyes. Unwearied, Echlann plied his blade, striving with cunning feints and double and triple strokes to break through that splendid defence. A thrust slipped between the scales, bit deep into Arthur's side. A half-parried slash sliced his forehead to the bone, sent red streams into his eyes. His left arm was agonized with weariness, but he must not let his shield droop low. He fought on, and like distorted giants his shadow and Echlann's fought too, growing longer and longer on the sunlit, red-sprinkled turf.

IT happened swiftly, at the end. Brushing sweat and blood from his face with his bare forearm, Arthur was almost too late to parry; Echlann's hissing blade sank through his ruined shield, grated on his left elbow. Echlann tugged free, staggering. Pain and rage for an instant brushed aside Arthur's deathly weariness. They were four or five paces apart. Arthur flipped his dagger, caught it by the point, threw it, quick as thought. Echlann, closing, ducked late. The knife flew, spinning. Point-first, it might have split the Pict's skull, but the distance was too short; it was the knobbed hilt that broke his nose, and sent him reeling.

Roaring, blinded, Echlann slashed down. His blade bit deep, deep—into the turf at Arthur's feet.

Before the Pict could disengage, Arthur fell on his sword-arm. Shieldless now, he used both hands to Echlann's one. He found the hilt, won it.

Before he could lift the sword, Echlann grappled. His buckler hammered on Arthur's helm. He had a dirk, lifted, stabbing. . . . Arthur freed the sword, made an upward slash. They fell together.

Arthur rolled, lurched up. The sword was still in his hand. Echlann sat up, burring Pictish oaths. He threw the dirk, and missed. His jockey-cap helm had fallen off, and as he shook his head his tangled hair fell over his face. He looked down, then laughed. Lounging back on both elbows, he stretched his neck, awaiting Arthur's stroke.

Peering with dimmed eyes, Arthur blinked at the pulsing gush of arterial

blood, forming a bright crimson pool under Echlann's thigh. *Just like Prince Deogratias.* . . . *It was a quick death.* Echlann sighed, flopped back, limp. Arthur floundered to his knees. With fumbling fingers he lifted the baldric over his head. It caught on his helm—now he tugged it free. That stout leather strap and long bronze sheath—just right—he knelt on Echlann's chest, lifted that red-dripping leg, and got the leather around it, with the sheath inside its loop. No, higher! It was a perfect tourniquet. Just turn the sheath round and round and round.

III

LIMP and bloody, Arthur and Echlann Gall were carried from the arena. King Ambrosius used language which shocked his daughter and interested his grandson. Not one good soldier lost, but two! The report of his physician that both might live did little to cheer him. He had small use for crippled men. But Arthur's use of the improvised tourniquet to stop the swiftly fatal rush of blood from Echlann's torn thigh, just before his own collapse, left the King curious. The next day he visited Corinium's military hospital, in the old Temple of Mars—a conversion which had appealed to Ambrosius' wry sense of humor.

Arthur lifted a hand in feeble salute, smiling up from his cot. Then he shook his bandaged head. "I was groggy—it seemed I had to stop that blood." His smile faded. "It was like Deogratias all over again—a pity I wasn't that quick with the Prince."

"That is done," Ambrose dismissed the thought of his dead son brusquely; kings must not weep. "Is that your sword there?" He pointed at the sheathed weapon hanging from a peg on the wall. "Strange, the way it broke at your first blow! I'd like to examine it. My men should have good weapons."

Arthur chuckled. "Then, see Echlann! This sword is his—mine now, by right of victory. Cavo brought it to me. You can tell Echlann I gave him the baldric and sheath, and he can have what's left of my sword to go with it. If he don't like the trade, he knows where to find me!"

Bedded across the room, Echlann growled deep in his throat.

IV

SPRING came, and with it the annual crop of recruits, drawn by the prizes and the glory of King Ambrosius' great Games. In masked face-casques, they tilted; with blunted broadswords pin-tipped, they fenced for "first blood;" Cavo Cupitianus was the new champion. Arthur and

Echlann were lookers-on, the Pict still too lame and Arthur's wounds still slowly healing. Then they were summoned together before the king.

"It is your own doing," said Ambrosius, in his private chamber, pushing aside his maps and regimental rolls. "Your feud was dearer to you than Britain's cause. No—I know you are willing to serve, but you are not fit. You both have much to learn, like any raw recruits. Well, those who cannot do more must do what they can. While my last son rides to war, I stay to guard Corinium—and this year, Arthur of Cornwall and Echlann of Caledonia, you shall serve with the city's guard." He paused, hawk eyes keen upon their reddened faces. "Have you aught to say? Will you serve as comrades?"

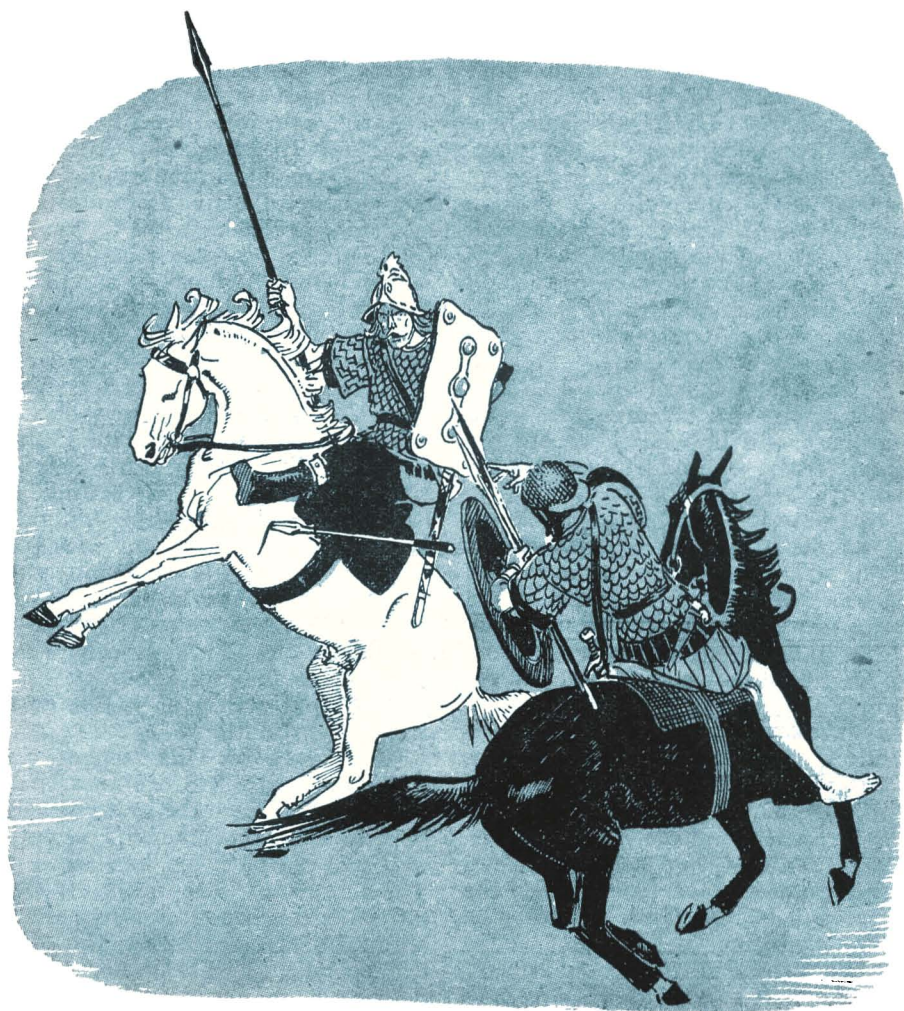
Together, they saluted, silently. The King sighed. "Well, well—dismissed!"

V

CONSPICUOUS in his scarlet cloak, King Ambrose leaned from the city's battlements, peering through a fragrant haze of wood-smoke. "Ha, I see them! Horse and foot and—what a train of wagons! Osla has something up his sleeve besides his dagger."

Around the two-mile circuit of Corinium's wall April sunlight picked out twinkling spear-points and glinting helms. They clustered thickest about the Northeast Gate, above which the king stood, surrounded by his officers. Beyond them on either side were the city militia, faces pale under ancient helms, eyes straining northward toward the burning suburban villas whose smoke screened the advancing enemy.

Osla of the Great Dagger, King of the Saxons encamped along the Middle Thames, was an old foe of King Ambrose. Ten years before there had been a truce, well kept on both sides. But now, Ambrose had sent his whole field army southward, to check the rising menace of Aelle the South Saxon, he who called himself *Brytenwalda*, the Wielder of Britain; and Aelle's riders had slipped through tangled Andred-wood and across the Thames to Osla's stockaded camp, beyond Oxen Ford. Osla had listened to the *Brytenwalda's* message, then called in his own half-breed spies, sent them across the border—meanwhile calling up all his fighting men. When the spies returned, confirming Aelle's words, Osla struck, straight for the heart of King Ambrosius' realm. As they marched, following the old Roman "Akeman Street," fording the lazy Evenlode, hastening through oak-shaded Wychwood, crossing the gently-flowing, trout-rich Windrush, Leach and Coln, sharp-



Echlann's second dart went home. Screaming in pain, the gray reared high.

eyed watchers—the shepherds of Cotswold, guiding their fleecy flocks from winter folds to the greening pastures of the windy uplands—had spied that winding, crawling serpent of armored men, had kindled warning beacons.

Even before dusty horsemen could reach Corinium's gates, the guards on the wall had sighted those red, angry eyes glowering and blinking their tale of nearing danger. So, King Osla's sudden thrust did not take Cirencester unaware, though dreadfully under-garrisoned. Gallopers sped northward to Vi'rancōn,* westward to Glevum,** southward to Aquæ*** carrying the summons of Ambrose. But they would come late. . . .

Out of the powder-blue haze of the burning suburbs trotted a thin column of fair-tressed horsemen. Riding at ease, just outside javelin-range of the walls, they calmly scrutinized the defences of Corinium. A rising cry of anger rippled along the walls as they passed, pointing here and there with long spears, nodding high-peaked helms in agreement. Slowly they made the two-mile circuit, splashing

through the little River Churn (*Corinos*—source of the city's name) which, flowing under the Roman walls, bisected Corinium on its way to join the Thames. King Ambrose followed their leisurely progress with furrowed brow.

"Pray God our allies come swiftly!" breathed Arthur.

The King shook his head. "Pray God they come not too soon. All our best is gone south with Casner, out of my call. If Osla should catch our city levies in the open, he'd swallow them at a gulp. I sent only for mounted men, and bade them ride warily, not come rushing to destruction."

"But,"—Arthur lowered his voice—"can we hold the city, with so few regulars—just the Picts and your body-guard, to stiffen the militia?"

"We must." The king's thin fingers caressed his ivory sword-hilt. "We must! Corinium is the key-point; frecc Britain falls or stands with us—and Britain must stand! The citizens are good enough fighters, behind their walls. It is only in the open field they are no match for the Saxon phalanx." He shook his helmeted head ruefully. "I gambled on Osla's faith

*Worcester. **Gloucester. ***Bath.

—and lost! I have one of his sons as hostage—but what good would it do us to hang the boy?”

“It would be one Saxon less—ain’t that enough?” rumbled Belinic the Master-smith. His portly figure encased in a gilded breastplate, this captain of militia eclipsed his king in splendor. His huge arms were laden with golden bracelets, his strong but pudgy fingers a constellation of jeweled rings. He was by far the richest man in the city, and very conscious of that fact. “O King Ambrose, y’ are too soft!”

The King ignored him. “While Osla surveys our defences from without, it might be well if we did the same from within. Come, gentlemen!”

IN the blue dimness of foredawn, Osla struck. As watch-fires burned low and weary sentries yawned, naked *seax*-men rose from the gurgling Churn, having swum under the iron-pronged portcullis that guarded the southeastern water-gate. With chopping, stabbing knives (“snouted” exactly like the American Bowie knives of thirteen centuries later) they slew swiftly, quietly. The portcullis pulley screeched, and the iron grill rose. A column of Osla’s mail-clad thanes rose also, from their places beside the river-bank and poured into the city. . . .

In his tiny sleeping-compartment, Arthur woke to the din of horns and babble of frantic voices from the street. “*Saxons! Inside the wall! Corinium is lost!*” Shrugging into mail-shirt, donning helm and shield, he snatched his sword-belt from the wall and made for the door. Half-dressed citizens, young and old, were pouring from their homes, wild-eyed, calling to one another frantically. Panic had begun to take hold.

Arthur used his great voice. “Hold!” he shouted. “Corinium is not lost. Clear the street, that we may march to save her!” With a score of the royal guards who were off watch, he mounted and rode to the Forum. Ambrosius was there, fully dressed and armored. Arthur wondered if the old King had slept at all. A stream of messengers, some horsed, some running, were coming and going in every direction. Oil to the south-east rose a growing tumult. Orange-red, flames bloomed over gabled housetops. A rueful, moaning cry lifted from the townsfolk streaming away westward. “To the West Gate! To Glevum!”

Ambrosius, on the Basilica steps, spoke crisply to his captains. Trumpets pealed; mailed horsemen blocked the westward streets with crossed lances. An iron-lunged herald relayed the King’s command to remain within the Forum square. “The West

Gate is closed—we have not lost. Men, to your companies! Let the rest pray for our victory, and *keep off the streets!*” Milling, grumbling, the crowd obeyed.

With Ambrosius were Porius, his guard-captain, Echlann Gall, still limping from his wound, three or four others. Turning from a messenger, so breathless as to be almost unintelligible, the old King showed white teeth. Arthur felt a renewed surge of admiration for the indomitable old warrior.

“It might be worse,” said the King. “It soon will be, if we act not! Osla has the southeastern water-gate, and is pushing a column along the Churn. All along the north wall his men are attacking with rams and scaling-ladders—that is the meaning of their many wagons. They came with gear for the assault ready-made, instead of taking time to build them on the spot. Osla grows craftier with age!”

Belinic the Master-smith came shouldering into the group. “Then we must split our forces—half to north and half to south.”

“That is what Osla hopes,” said King Ambrose. “No, we must strike with all our force at the worse menace, then turn on the other. The north wall will not be taken in a moment. The real danger lies south. If Osla can widen his penetration to the Calleva Gate and open that, Corinium will be his. . . . The Water Gate is narrow; if we recover it, lower the portcullis before Calleva Gate falls, the Saxons inside are doomed men!”

“Lead us, Emrys Wledig!” In their excitement, men forsook Latin for their native British speech.

The King nodded his crested helm. “I have already dispatched our best company of archers to reinforce the Calleva Gate. We shall not strike the point of Osla’s spear, but its shaft—I count sixty horsemen. These I shall lead. I do not think Osla has extended his front much beyond the Churn. It is from that side we can best recover the Water Gate. Let Echlann’s Picts and the citizen reserves follow us, to hold what we regain. . . . Britons, it is for our homes we fight, this day. *Up, Red Dragon!*”

“*Up, Red Dragon!*” came the answer, thunderously. A grizzled cavalryman of the Guard lifted high his lance-staff. Against the paling sky, Arthur saw again the familiar, bobbing, reptilian figure of the Red Dragon, its leathery, ragged wing flapping in the dawn-wind. Such inflated effigies had been carried before the greater generals of Rome. Now, under Ambrose, the Dragon had become the standard of free Britain; as *Y Ddraig Goch* it is still the emblem of that shrunken but unreconstructed Celtic Britain which is Wales—*Cymru, Combrogia, Comrade-land,*

the land of those who learn comradeship in their defence of the homeland against heathen destroyers. In many a battle, lost and won, the Red Dragon of Ambrose the King had led the soldiers of Britain. Seeing it there, rampant and blood-red against the gray sky, now greening toward dawn, British hearts lifted with it. Hoofs clapping on cobbled pavements, the sixty horsemen followed the old King, the old ragged battle-standard, and sang as they rode. Clanking war-gear and ringing hoofs beat time to the rough rhythm of that “warrior’s triplet” verse;

*Heaven above and Hell below
And all between, we will make know—
Britain is Britain, to the last blow!*

Following the wide esplanade inside the city’s wall, they struck a ragged mass of Saxon spearmen, split it, drove forward with stabbing lances. They won to the Churn’s waters, splashed through to win the Water-Gate. Saxon war-horns were bawling. Thanes in chain-mail charged shield to shield, long swords lopping slender British lance-shafts. His lance broken, Arthur whipped out the blade he had won from Echlann. His first blow split a grinning, blond-bearded face from helm-edge to chin. A thrown axe *whished* past his own face. A Saxon broadsword, blunt at point but sharp of edge, clove his wooden shield to the iron boss. His counter left an armless hand clinging to the Saxon sword-hilt. He threw the shield away. Thrusting at close range, men slew and were slain with little noise.

A sword rang on Arthur’s helm. Swaying in the saddle, he struck back—felt his blade go deep. Sticky warmth spurted up his arm to the elbow. Eyes clearing of shock-dazzle, he found his steed climbing the far bank of the Churn. His trousered legs were wet and cold. “*Alban a-bu!*” That was the war-cry of Echlann’s Picts, charging close on the knights’ heels. Porius, holding the dragon-staff he had snatched from the dead hands of its bearer, turned to the King at his side. “That does it! We’ve—” His voice faded. A javelin quivering between his shoulders, where its needle point had pierced his mail, he toppled. The King caught the staff, held the Red Dragon high. “We’ve won!”

VI

WITH daybreak, the Saxon spearhead, broken at the Water-Gate, melted under a rain of missiles. Slanting across the city, the blood-stained victors swept back to the north wall. Here the scaling-ladders had been placed, under a barrage of Saxon arrows and slingbolts.

On the wall-top, around the North-east Gate, Saxon swords had won a widening space. Trotting up the wall-stairs, the Picts checked them. King Ambrose mounted a bastion tower, gave orders. *Creak-Boom!* the long timber of a catapult lashed out, and a half-ton stone fell into the midst of a Saxon group moving up to the attack. From other towers, other catapults spoke, as the growing light made accurate fire possible. King Osla's own horn called his thanes back. The wall was cleared.

Inside Corinium, fear had given way to the heady exultation of victory. Men brandished spear and sword, beat on the thick oaken valves of the gate. "O King Ambrose, lead us to vengeance and victory! Lead us! LEAD US OUT!"

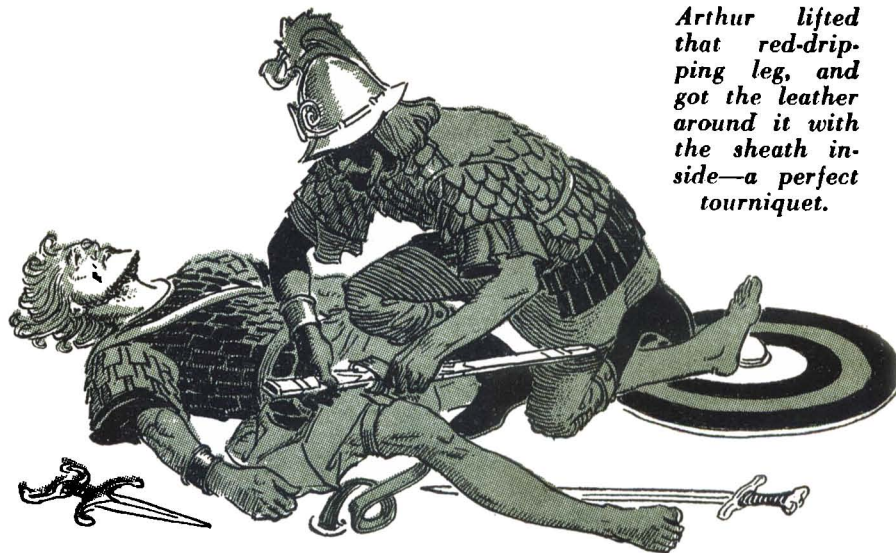
ATOP the tower, Ambrosius surveyed the milling Saxon ranks, rapidly steadying into line, then the Britons within the walls. He spoke into the ear of his herald, iron-lunged Widno, who relayed his master's words to the crowd below: "Closed are the gates—let them remain shut! Stand fast, every true Briton!" Outside, the Saxon ranks awaited the attack that did not come; inside, the tumult slowly died down. Grumbling, the civic militia returned to their places.

Afternoon came. The Saxon camp was astir. Split into their marching units, the heathen host filed past the southern walls, rumbling wagon-wheels mingling with their shouts of derision. From the walls, the Corinians answered them. King Osla's thanes, mounted and spear-armed, formed a moving screen about the baggage train. From the southwest corner-bastion, King Ambrose saw his foes take the road to Aquæ Sulis, that aristocratic spa which is now Bath. Pushing back his high-crested helmet, the old King rubbed his brow and sighed; the lines in his face had deepened.

At his elbow, Belinic the Master-smith gave a cry of rage. "My farm—they're headed there! My wife and children! My sheep and cattle—King, we must follow and give battle, ere they sweep the land bare!"

Many of the bright-armed magnates of Corinium joined in the Master-smith's cry. The Romano-British man of wealth lived on his country estate, which might include a half-dozen villages of share-cropping rural serfs. The less the town-councilmen saw of your property, the less your taxes were! Now, before their agonized eyes, a torrent of ruin flowed toward their homes. The demand for battle gained volume as the Saxon rear-guard waved mocking farewells.

"A night attack might work," said Echlann Gall. "If we took them before dawn, and they were sleeping—"



Arthur lifted that red-dripping leg, and got the leather around it with the sheath inside—a perfect tourniquet.

"With militia?" asked Ambrose. "Could you keep them silent, blundering through the dark? It is we would be caught, and you know it."

Echlann nodded. "Aye, but I hate to miss a fight!"

"Lead us! Lead us!" came the chorus of estate-owners. Ambrose turned on them, eyes bright with anger: "*Satis!* To sally out would be putting our necks in the noose. Do you think Osla displayed his full force under our walls? Half his army went through the open country, waiting his call. And you'd give Osla his wish! Not so are wars won. Had you thought as much of the safety of your families as you did of evading my tax-assessors, they would be safe behind our stout walls. Silence! Back to your posts—this southward march may be a trick!"

Muttering angrily, banging shields against the parapets, the city magnates obeyed him. Eyes wise and weary, Ambrose watched them go. A long lifetime in defence of civilization against raw savagery, and still no peace, no rest! "Captain Artorius," he spoke softly, thoughtfully, the rasping note of command gone from his voice: "I am not loved by all within these walls. I have made Corinium my capital, instead of Sorbiodunum, the stronghold of my ancestors, for Corinium is the hub from which roads radiate—the central point in the defence of West Britain. Yet the Corinians recall they once had a king, Vitalinus, who bought peace for them from the Saxon."

"At the cost of shame for themselves and ruin for their land," said Arthur.

"When I built my Long Wall* against the Saxons," continued the King, "I had to leave Vitalinus' realm

*The Wansdyke—the great earthwork which stretches, roughly east and west, for eighty miles across southern England, from Inkpen in Berkshire to near Bristol.

on the Saxon side. It lay untouched, prospering as the heathen hosts marched through to devastate the lands beyond. Then I overthrew Vitalinus and brought Corinium into the war. It has been a long, long war, and no end to it in sight. . . Some men have never forgiven me for that."

"Who?" asked Arthur, softly.

King Ambrosius shrugged his tasseled shoulders. "I know some, not all. *Watch!*" His voice changed, softened. "I would be a righteous ruler, under God, to bind up the wounds of our land. I put no trust in tattlers, nor in terror. Yet in this evil time, I must be wary, wary of treachery!" He glanced at Arthur. "You're tired, lad! When did you sleep?"

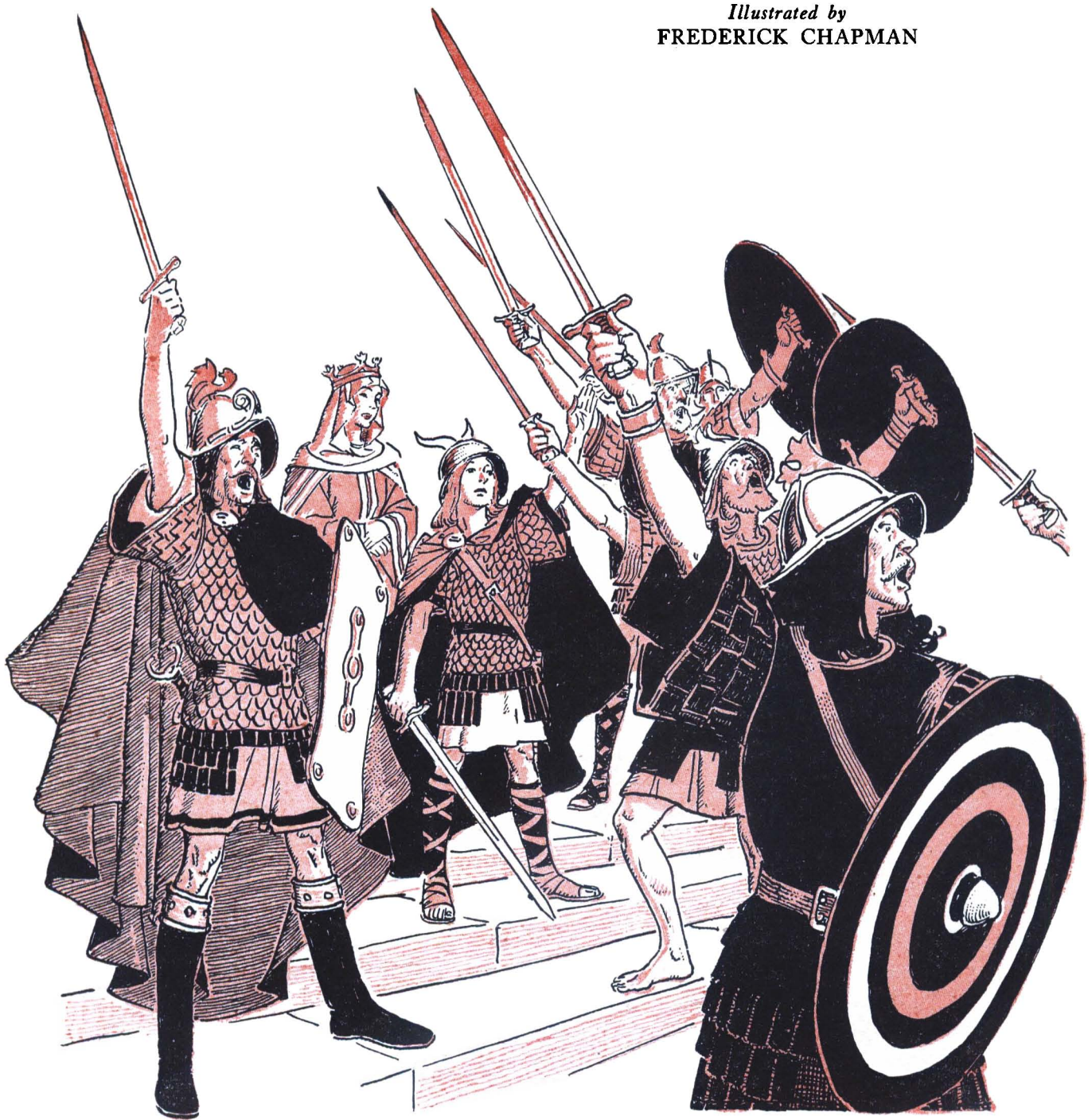
"Night before last."

"And you scarce fit to wear armor! Get supper, then to bed. I have scouts following Osla, to bring warning if he turns. Sleep well, and join me at breakfast, you and Eclannus. I have a plan forming. We'll discuss it then."

Coming to that breakfast in cloak and tunic, Arthur and Echlann Gall were met at the door by news of the King's death.

VII

KING AMBROSE lay on his own bed, with its polished bronze frame, and soft feather mattress. His lined face was calm, almost happy. Clad only in his undershirt of white linen, he lay on his right side, atop the wrinkled covers. Between his shoulder-blades jutted the rough black staghorn handle of a Pictish knife. A single bead of dark blood stained the coverlet. Arthur and Echlann stepped closer, silent, moving softly as if not to disturb a sleeper, their eyes alert. A tiny movement pulled Arthur's gaze to the King's white hair, stirring faintly in the gentle breeze. He bent forward peering,



In one voice, the crowd answered: "King Romanus, be victorious!"

then turned. Yes, the breeze came from an open window. On the floor inside, and on the small balcony outside the window were muddy stains—the tread of splay-toed bare feet.

"A Pict's dagger," moaned Honorius, the Chamberlain, wringing his plump hands. "And the footprints of a barefoot Pict at the window—they tell me half the buildings are chalked 'Ave Eclanius Rex'—Hail, King Echlann!"

Hand on sword, Echlann Gall glared about him. "That is no doing of mine! Who of my Picts can write? Am I the fool to think Britons would hail me as their King? Ambrose was

our friend, our protector, our paymaster—we Picts are not such fools as that, by Lug's long hand!"

"Where were you and your men?" asked Arthur dryly.

Echlann's eyes blazed at him. "Other men than Picts can go barefoot! In the South Gate towers we were, all night. I take oath no man of mine had a part in this deed."

"A Pict's oath—hmp!" sniffed Honorius, keeping well away from him.

"I think he speaks truth," said Arthur quietly. "In their tower, they could have slipped over the wall and been miles away ere the deed was

known. When you told us at the door I saw Echlann's face—he was the surprised man! No, Honorius, the deed was not done by a Pict, nor yet with that Pict's *skene dhu*."

"But—you can see—" stammered the Chamberlain.

Arthur nodded. "I see a stab-wound with a wide mouth, which yet bled but a drop. Why did it not bleed more? *Because the King was dead before he was stabbed.*"

"Then what killed him?" Echlann and Honorius spoke as one.

"This!" Arthur gently moved the white head, parted the hair. "See, here on the back of his head, the

bruised flesh dented in. That was no gentle blow! A slingbolt slew our King."

Echlann and Honorius glanced at the floor. "No," Arthur went on. "His slayer would have taken that with him. He meant the killing to be blamed on the Picts." He strode to the window, pushed wide the hinged casement. "Ugh! Too tight for me. The man who came through this window had narrower shoulders than mine—or yours, Echlann."

Echlann grunted.

Turning from the room of death, Arthur strode down silent corridors, and left the house. Echlann and the Chamberlain went with him, to a garden-courtyard below the balcony. They studied the soft ground. "Two men," said Arthur. "Yes," Echlann nodded, "and both wore shoes till they came under the balcony. Here are deep shoe-marks, where the other man boosted Bare Feet up."

A rosebush waved thorny green tendrils in the breeze. Arthur plucked a wool thread from one. "A scrap from someone's cloak. A good red-and-green one, you'll notice."

"Um!" said Echlann. "We Picts wear skins, not wool. But the town dudes—Flavia Aurelia should ha' been wed ere now. Maybe it was her fancy man."

Arthur's fist tumbled Echlann into the rosebush. Red-faced, save for the white scar on his brow, the Cornishman stood over him. "Bridle your filthy tongue! She is now our chief, and to be respected."

Echlann rolled, swiftly kicked at his angry face. Arthur jumped back, and the Pict bounded to his feet, crouched like an angry cat, hand on sword-hilt. "If ye think—"

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" Honorius came puffing between them. "No more scenes, I implore you! Ah, this terrible time! Let us do what we can to maintain order and decency."

Arthur nodded. Echlann spat on the ground.

VIII

TWO weeks passed. Corinium lay islanded in a sea of devastation. Empty lay the paved Roman roads, bright in the soft April sun. A few wayfarers crept fearfully from thicket to thicket and scurried across open moors to bring tales of horror. Southward, smoke soiled the blue sky. . . .

A meeting of the Royal Council, presided over by Flavia Aurelia, had authorized messages of recall to Prince Casner, who would investigate his father's murder. But Casner was far to the south, grappling with the hosts of Kent and the South Saxons. Until his coming, his sister would act as Regent, with military command divided

between Arthur and Echlann—an idea of the Princess, which pleased neither man. There had been some outcry against the Pict, subsiding as Flavia made the true facts known.

Two scouts returned, haggard men on weary ponies. Osla's host, now burdened with immense spoil, was once more moving on Corinium!

Crowds gathered in the Forum, the central square, before the Basilica. Men bunched, speaking low, glancing over shoulders. Others moved from group to group, vehement and assured. Then, all at once, a resounding cry: "A King! Give us a King! A King to lead us to victory! A King!" Shields rattled, and spears flashed.

Summoned in haste from his evening meal, Arthur entered the Basilica, wiping gravy from his brown mustachios and tightening his belt. The tumult outside was thunderous. "Clang-bang! GIVE US A KING!" "Clang-bang, Clang-bang!"

Flavia Aurelia, black-gowned, sat in her father's chair, in the almost empty Council Hall. Echlann and Honorius were beside her, and a gray-bearded Councilor was hobbling to his seat.

"My Picts can clear the Forum, any time at all!" Echlann was saying, as Arthur drew closer.

"No!" Aurelia sprang to her feet. Her fiery-gold aureole of hair, and pale oval face contrasted vividly with her mourning garb. "Most of that crowd are honest folk, distracted with long anxiety. Someone is working on them—if only we could quiet their minds."

"Cold steel is a great quieter, Lady," grinned Echlann.

"There are better," said Arthur. "You know the saying: *'Not good the act of one sword, unless it sends two others into their sheaths!'*" Aurelia flashed him a grateful glance. Echlann sneered. "Name a better way, Cornishman!"

"I will," said Arthur. "Give them the king they ask, ere someone else does! There is here a grandson of Ambrose."

"Romanus?" Aurelia stared. "He—a child—could not control that mob. It would be his death."

"I think not," insisted Arthur. "He is a handsome boy, not fearful—a goodly sight in his small armor, belted with his father's sword—a sight to lift hearts. Let us give them their King!"

Flavia Aurelia twisted slender, gold-ringed hands. "He is so young—"

"Ten—were there not younger Emperors of Rome? And you, his aunt, to be his regent?"

Flavia Aurelia looked at the sturdy Cornishman with deep perplexity in her gray eyes. "Artorius—my father trusted you. Even when he was angered at your duel with Eclanuis, he told me that . . . Yet, here is danger.

Casner, my brother, is the last-left son of Ambrosius. The kingship is his of right. If he returns to find we have crowned Romanus, his nephew, in his absence—"

Arthur nodded. "He may be angry. Would it be better for him to find Corinium a gutted shell, Saxon-wrecked, without light, without life, without folk? Casner is grappling with Aelle, the Saxon over-king; we cannot guess when he will return—if ever. Princess, I took the *sacramentum*, the soldier's oath, to your father. It stands this day, with you in his place. What you order, I will do. But this is my counsel: give Corinium a King!"

Echlann hiccuped. "Princess, the Cornishman has a big mouth. Yet even he is sometimes right. Now I—"

Aurelia spoke her own thought. "I am the daughter of the King. The Council chose me regent in Casner's absence. Could not the people trust me, yet awhile?"

"Yes!" Honorius, the old Chamberlain, seconded her. "Why all this talk of making kiggs while we have a legitimate ruler? Why such haste?"

Arthur lifted his hand. "Listen!" he said.

BELINIC the Master-smith, teetering atop the driver's seat of his resplendent two-horse chariot, waved fleshy arms above the crowd. His bull voice roared across the Forum:

"Worst danger ever, with the Saxons closing in on us! What leadership have we? A weak-kneed Council, headed by a slip of a girl! And military leaders? A dirty hired Pict, under suspicion of the assassination of our late, beloved King! And who else? A Cornish exile on the make, with a knack for outliving his commanders! Such is the safeguard of our lives! We must act—not next week, not tomorrow, but now, *tonight!*" Belinic paused, wiped his eyes. "Friends, I know how you feel," he resumed, in a lower tone. "I too have dear ones, out there somewhere, maybe in the hands of the Saxons—" his deep tones throbbed—"For the sake of our dear ones, our wives, our children, we must *act!*" Again his voice rose thunderously. "Let's choose a king for ourselves! A man we know! A man we can all trust! I ask this assembly to—suggest a name—"

"*Romanus Aurelianus!*" Arthur's words slashed across the master-smith's rhetoric like a trumpet blast.

Belinic tottered on his lofty perch. Turning, he goggled toward the Basilica. Arthur and Echlann stood on the marble steps, swords bare in their hands. Between them and two steps above, stood a slender boy of ten. Flickering torchlight gleamed on the massive helm of Ambrosius, on the sword of Deogratias, lifted in a sol-

dier's salute. Romanus Aurelianus held it firmly in one small hand, his left arm flung out as in greeting to the massed Corinians. Under the great helm, his face was pale, his lips, tight-pressed into the same thin line as those of Ambrose Aurelian, familiar to every citizen. Then, suddenly, as all eyes fastened on him, the grandson of King Ambrose smiled, broadly, bravely. A thin, clear, young voice was heard in the sudden silence.

"Alleluia!"

Since the memorable day in 429, when St. Germanus of Auxerre led a British army to victory with a war-cry taken from an Easter hymn, the soldiers of free and Christian Britain had gone into battle with that cry on their lips. It had not always brought the miraculous results of its first usage, but it was yet a cry of happy omen, to warrior, to churchman, to every Briton.

In one voice, the crowd answered him. "*Romane, Rex, tu vincas*—King Romanus, be victorious!"

Flavia Aurelia stepped to the side of her nephew, lifted the bronze helm by its crest. On tousled dark locks she laid a circlet of thin gold—the diadem of Ambrosius. About them, saluting swords flashed, clashed on lifted shields. Up, up, went the cry, ringing through the spring twilight. "*Romane Rex, tu vincas!*"

IX

ON the second day of his reign, King Romanus perched on the battlements of the East Gate tower and looked for the first time on his foes. There were yellow-haired spearmen on horseback, circling and prodding onward a great mass of bawling cattle, then a still larger body of sheep—harvest of their circuit through the lush pastures of Cotswold. Another body of Saxon horse accompanied squeaky-wheeled wagons piled high with plunder of every imaginable sort. Then more Saxons afoot—the churls those duty it was to serve the haughty thanes. Another moving screen of horsemen, herding their prey—but this time their cattle was human beings. Men, women, children, heads adroop, bound neck to neck with long ropes, stumbling with weariness. A small figure fell. A blond horseman bent to drive home his spear, then cut the rope and re-tied it. The slow procession went on, leaving the small body on the trampled grass beside the road. Young King Romanus caught his breath. "Captain Artorius," he asked, "why don't we go out and fight, and set those poor people free?"

"That is what the Saxons are goading us to do." Arthur spoke softly, as always when repressing his fury. "O King Romanus, your wisdom must

shield your folk! How many Saxons do you see?"

"Why—" Romanus hesitated. "May be a thousand or two."

"Between three and four thousand. They are picked warriors. Inside the walls we have maybe five hundred men armed—less than a hundred veterans. Only with heavy cavalry have we ever matched the Saxon in the open field—and there is not a single *ala* at Corinium today! Now, King Romanus, shall we give battle on those terms?"

The boy-King sighed. "I suppose not. It's really not much fun being a King, is it? Did you count those soldiers, Captain?"

Arthur turned, looked down within the walls. A wide avenue was filled by a disorderly column, marching toward the gate. Thunderous but indistinct, their shouting drifted up. He recognized the insignia of units which should have been at posts along the city walls.

"Open the gates! Victory or death!" That was the voice of Belinic. "Victory or death! Death to the Saxons! Open the gates!" echoed the mob, brandished weapons flashing in the noontide sun.

Arthur glanced about him. At his side stood faithful, grizzle-bearded old Cac'muri, his man, holding Arthur's shield in readiness. "King, stay here atop the tower—Cac'muri, guard him well!" He snatched the shield from his servant. "The rest of you come along!" He took the circular tower stairway three treads at each stride, drawing sword as he plunged downward.

The outer door was unbarred. He flung it open. A wild-eyed youth was lifting the upper gate-bar from its place. The flat of his blade smacked on a tousled pate, and the youth crumpled, face down. The bar rattled back into its sockets.

Belinic lurched toward him. Helmed and with drawn sword, clad in his gilded cuirass, the armorer was a formidable figure. His massive jowl thrust out, fleshy underlip drooping to bare long horse-teeth. "Well!" he bellowed. "Ain't that a brave soldier, to kill one o' our own lads? Why don't you try that sword on a Saxon, or are you just too plain yellow?"

Arthur sidled toward the middle of the gate. With an effort he spoke calmly. "The fellow's only stunned. Keep back, or you'll get worse! In the King's name, I order you back to your posts." He glimpsed the white face of one of his men in the tower doorway. The mob outnumbered them ruinously, but if they could form a line—

Belinic laughed—hoarsely, angrily. "King's name! To hell with your baby King! We gotta have action. . . .

Up there on the wall, I seen my wife—yes an' my children too—and a damned Saxon whipping them on with a rope-end! There's hundreds of us here with our families in the same fix. We're not gonna let no baby King nor no yellow-bellied Cornish traitor keep us penned inside the walls while them horse-eaters march past, bold as brass! It's our last chance, men! I say, let's save our families—go out and fight, win or die!"

"This is rebellion," said Arthur evenly. His words were drowned in the roar of acclaim for Belinic's oratory.

"Okay, it's rebellion." The smith's eyes glittered feverishly. He inched forward, sword ready. "No Saxon takes Belinic's wife, while Belinic lives!"

"You could not recognize her, from your post," disputed Arthur. Three of his men were beside him now.

"I guess I know my own wife!" roared Belinic. "Listen, men! The baby king and his coward captain won't lead us. Hide while the Saxons lead away our wives and wealth, say they. Well, there are men inside Corinium that won't take that for an answer!"

"Hail!" shouted his followers.

"Rubbish!" snapped Arthur. "You are running into the trap Osla has set. While Corinium holds out, free Britain lives, get that! Prince Casner is on his way with troops—we can win yet, if you don't throw our chance away! To give battle now is suicide."

"Listen to the coward!" bawled somebody, back in the mob. "Soldier, we ain't scared of you—you ain't behind our backs like you was behind Deogratias at Portus Magnus—haw, haw!"

"Listen here, Arthur!" Belinic leaned forward. "You ain't the only commander here. We got Echlann on our side. Your guys can't stop his Picts an' you know it! Better get on the winning side while there's time. Open that gate!"

ARTHUR's heart sank. Echlann hated him, could be depended on to side against him. And—only five soldiers had joined him, backs to the gate. No more followed. The others must be watching from inside, irresolute, awed by the fury of the mob. How could he stop the raw fury of a Pictish sword-charge with such lack of material? Worse yet, if Osla perceived the wall-sectors emptied of defenders—

"You are all traitors to your King and city!" His voice shook with rage. "Get back to your posts!"

"Listen to 'im!" thundered Belinic. His keen ears caught the tremor in Arthur's voice, interpreted it as fear.

"Traitors, are we? Men, who is your King? Who d'ye want to lead you out to win back your kith and gear? *Who is your king?*"

The answer was prompt. "Belinic! King Belinic! Hail! Hail! Hail!"

"Do you hear that?" And Belinic showed his long teeth in a triumphant snarl.

"Out—swords!" ordered Arthur. With trembling hands, the five drew, stood awkwardly at his right side. He drew a deep breath, put the full power of his lungs into a sudden shout. "On your lives—stand back from the gate!"

A torrent of mocking laughter answered him. The mob surged forward; then hung, hesitant, just beyond reach of the waiting steel. Belinic took a forward step, huge shoulders hunched. His blade half-lifted, he glanced back. "Come on, men! We'll win or die!"

"Then—die!" Arthur clashed shield to shield, stabbed over the rims. Belinic writhed backward, fell, kicking. He clutched at his bull neck, spouting red. A wheezing gasp, then he collapsed, a pricked bladder.

"Next!" Arthur stood over the man he had slain. At his side, five blades lifted with new resolution.

"Men—Britons!" Arthur strained his great voice to drown the mingled outcry of dismay and anger. "Hear me! I am your captain, your defender. I've killed a madman, who would have led you to your ruin. . . . Corinium stands, free Britain lives! Help is coming, coming, coming! If you are true warriors, back and guard your posts, ere the Saxons come swarming over our good walls!"

THE mob wavered. "No—yes! He's right! Nay, 'tis a coward's counsel! What—he that killed Belinic in fair fight? Nay, he struck when he wasn't looking! Not so! Liar! Liar yourself, Sulpidius Fishmonger!" So they milled, arguing, all but split into opposing factions. Tectering in the balance, if he could win them—

Arthur lifted his sword high—the blade he had won from Echlann Gall, red-beaded now with the blood of Belinic. "Hear this! I but wait for the—"

It was the merest chance that his sword was lifted, that his eye caught the instant flicker of a flying projectile. To cut at it was swordsman's instinct. In that sliver of time, his blade moved an inch or two—rang, bell-like, and dropped from his numbed hand. He staggered, covering with his shield. At his side, a groan arose. "Slingers! Now we are done!"

"Get him! Come on, boys!" The crowd boiled toward them. Five swords lashed out—the rush halted abruptly.

Sss-bong! One of the faithful five clutched at his dented helm, reeled, pitched forward face-down on the rutted cobblestones before the gate timbers.

"Now we got 'em!" exulted a voice, discreetly well back. "Come on—kill the swine!"

Arthur shook feeling back into his hand. Bending, shield lifted, he reached for his sword. The shield quivered and boomed at the impact of a leaden slingbolt. His fingers closed on the hilt. A spear stabbed at him. Arthur lunged, rising, and the spearman skipped backward.

SHELTERING behind their shields, Arthur and his four stood firm. *Sss-spap!* . . . *Sss-bong!* The bolts came at measured intervals, aimed at their faces. *Only one slinger, but he's an expert,* judged Arthur. "Cover your faces!" he warned. "Those bolts can't pierce a shield!" Yes, but neither could they spot the slinger, or reach him if they could! How long could they keep the mob in check, pinned down, forced to cover up?

One of the four dropped his sword. Bent with pain, clutching his broken wrist, he fled into the tower. A rush, blows given and taken—the mob spilled back like a broken wave, leaving one of their number writhing on the cobbles.

"Wait—listen!" implored Arthur's voice, booming behind his shield. *Ssss! bong!* The slinger tried again, failed by an inch. "Cap'n, let's charge!" implored the man at his side. "Them bolts—we'd be sheltered in that mob."

"No!" he made whiplash decision. "They'd get us from behind. Stand firm—shields up!"

It was all they could do. It only he had archers or slingers in the gate-towers, instead of old Cac'muri, the boy-King and the hesitant militiamen! What a chance for the Saxons, if Osla but knew!

The curious pause lengthened out. No more bolts—the hidden slinger must be watching for an unshielded face. . . . The mob milled about; shouted, cursed. Its first fervor was gone, but its mood remained ugly. Only a little stimulus, and they would rush. . . . Arthur tried to harangue them from behind his shield, but his efforts only provoked jeers. "Yah—Cornish swine! Let's see the color of your face!" A few stones came flying, with poor aim. Then a sudden yelp, far back; "Here come the Picts! Lead us, Echlann Gall!"

Arthur heard his faithful three catch breath in dismay. A hundred Picts, each a demon in battle—they would not hesitate to close with armored men! With the Picts for spearhead, the mob could roll over them, open the gates, pour out into

Osla's baited trap. . . . Well, he would stand his ground. Never again could men say that Arthur had saved himself!

"Way for Echlann Gall! Way for the men of Alban!" came the proud, chanting challenge. The city mob sidled over. Through the passage opened came Echlann's "centuria" of Picts. Tall, lean, sinewy men, they came on, unhurried, striding easily. Small, round bucklers aswing in their left hands, *up-down, up-down!* Right hands held light throwing-spears, bronze-braceleted arms cocked to the shoulder. Naked to the waist, vividly tattooed with the mystical symbols of Old Alban in red and green and blue, kilted in fiery tartans, lean muscles rippling, hairy-faced and hairy-chested, white teeth and blue eyes shining with anticipated delight of slaughter, Echlann's Picts were the grinning images of Mars. Leading them came Echlann, helmed and leather-jacketed. His longsword dribbled red on the cobbles. So there had been fighting elsewhere. . . .

Grinning hugely, his broken nose twisted askew, the Pict lifted his red blade in ironic salute.

"Hail, Cornishman! A tight corner you're in, the day!"

Arthur returned his salute. "Hail, Pict! I still have sword-room. . . . Will you try men's truth with me again?"

That was but a sudden inspiration. "Men's truth"—the code of fair play which called on the larger force to give single combat to a lone challenger—would give them a little time. Maybe the Saxons would be gone, if Aurelia could do something. . . . A faint hope, but he had no better. He would give the Pict—

"Men's truth!" Echlann laughed resoundingly, with real mirth. "Lug's Hand! As the blue sky is overhead, and the green earth underfoot, and the white-waved sea round about, while those remain it is I and my men will stand with you, against all comers—Is that truth enough for you, Arthur of Cornwall?"

HE whirled, and his Picts whirled also, spears lifted against the mob, which shrank, cried out in protest, began to thin at the farther edges.

"Hear me!" Echlann's Caledonian twang flavored the South-British he spoke fluently. "This man before you is a hero of heroes—he has slain the chief of the slayers of our Ambrose!"

"How's that?" bawled someone. "How d'ye know who killed King Ambrose?"

"Hearken!" rasped Echlann. "It is I who know of the killing and of the vengeance, and this the tale of it. . . . Belinic hated the King. Why? Because he deemed himself the bastard

son and heir of Vitalinus whom Ambrosius drove from Corinium."

"Aye!" Heads nodded in the crowd. "He used to rant o' that."

Echlann went on: "There was more than that. The King had found Belinic was cheating, furnishing cheap weapons instead of the good ones called for in his arms contracts. He'd have stood trial for that if the King had lived. But somebody must have talked. . . . And Belinic lusted after the King's daughter, and knew he stood no chance while her father lived. Yet more . . . It was Belinic egged me on to taunt and challenge Arthur. He had Arthur's sword in his shop. Instead of repairing it truly, Belinic filed through the tang, inside the hilt, so it would break at the first hard blow. Then he bet on me to win."

"I HAD guessed that," said Arthur. "Why did he hate me so?"

"He judged you faithful to the King—an obstacle in his path. . . . After I lost the duel and his bets, he hated me also! But when you took my sword, leaving me yours, I saw the filed tang. . . . I took the broken sword to Belinic, and asked what he would give for it, holding the tang where it took the light. That skin-flint took one look, and paid me a hundred gold *solidi*! He thought he was paying me for silence, but I'd already shown the sword to Ambrosius! Now we knew he was the guilty man, not any of his underlings. The old King was wroth. . . . But a spy of Belinic's reported my visit to the King. Before he could be summoned to judgment, the King must die. So Belinic called his henchman, Corroi the Hunter. Together they lay in wait, outside the palace."

"Where were the guards?" demanded someone.

"Doped with drugged wine. Belinic had many hirelings! The night was far gone when the King dismissed his last guest and his servants. He stood at the window, breathing the air. He turned, and Corroi's sling-bolt struck him down. But they must be sure he was dead—and sure that I was blamed. Belinic boosted Corroi up, and Corroi slipped in at the window, took back his bolt, and carried the old King to his bed, and stabbed him there with a dagger one of my boys had given the smith in payment for some work, years ago. While this was done, Belinic's rascals were chalking up the town with signs, making me the goat!

"Belinic thought his destiny was to be King. He took this as his chance. All his blether about his wife and children was to gain your favor. He wanted Aurelia, and if the Saxons widowed him, 'twas little that Belinic cared!"

"And how do you know all this stuff?" yelled a voice. Others chimed in. "Yeah, how about that?"

Echlann's beard waggled, rusty-red in the sun. "When a man is accused of murdering his King, he looks about him. When Arthur found the dent in the old King's skull, I thought of Corroi. I found Corroi parading a new, expensive cloak, of green and red wool. Just the kind that had left a thread on the rosebush outside the King's window. Of course it had been Belinic's, given to Corroi as part payment for the deed. Corroi was cagey. He'd only say he found it, in an alley. He turned down a drink from me, for the first time in his life. I guess he was afraid his tongue might wag. . . . But then I found John the Assyrian!"

"The great astrologer?" asked a man in the front of the crowd. "What did he tell you?"

Echlann nodded. "Nothing at first, until I invited him to my quarters, to sample some heather ale one of my boys brewed. Ah, losh! There's nothing like heather ale, ye know. A crafty fellow, that John, but with no head for drinking against a Pict! He'd had many a customer here in Corinium, John said, and the things they asked him! I could tell tales on more than one of you—but he remembered Belinic at once, as his best customer of them all. The first time he came, Belinic asked if this would be his lucky night. The star-gazer thought he was speaking of gambling, and said yes. Then Belinic asked if the astrologer had any good poison. John said he didn't, but he did have a fine sleeping-potion. The smith bought it. That was the night the guards were drugged, and Ambrose killed!"

"After that, said John, Belinic came back every night. He wanted to know when he would be King. He was so fierce about it, the astrologer got worried. He told Belinic at 'the Kalends,' only, John says he meant the Greek Kalends, which is never. Of course Belinic thought he meant the *nex*t Kalends—"

"AND today is the Kalends of May!" spoke Arthur.

"Aye. . . . My Picts have John the Astrologer in their tower lockup. I meant to have him testify before Prince Casner. But when the astrologer let drop that about the Kalends, I knew to be watchful this day. When he marched on the gates, I marched too. Now that is the true tale of how King Ambrose was slain, and your own eyes have seen how he was avenged by Arthur."

"What about Corroi?" asked Arthur. "There was a slinger here—"

"Corroi it was! A block off, I saw our new King, young Romanus. He

was up on the parapet of the tower, waving his dad's long sword. He kept pointing with it at a house. . . . That one, it has a flat-roofed shed behind its gabled roof. I looked, and there was Corroi with his sling, crouched in the shelter of the roof's peak. Corroi was never a very brave man. If he had known that Belinic was dead—but I guess the crowd was too thick. . . ."

"And then—"

Echlann grinned, looking at his reddened blade. "One of my boys boosted me up. Corroi knew me for Belinic's friend, your foe. . . . He winked at me, as he fitted a bolt into his sling. 'This one,' he said, 'splits Arthur's skull,' and began to whirl that sling of his. . . . He made a little mistake there. It was *his* head that split!"

The crowd joined his laughter. "Good old Echlann—Avenger of the King!"

Echlann clashed sword on buckler until he got attention. "Nay! Not me, but Arthur is the true avenger—for Corroi was the hand of it, while Belinic was the head. A cheer for Arthur, stout lads, all!"

The Picts raised their shout, banging shields and spears. Slowly at first, the crowd joined in. "Arthur, Arthur! Hail, Arthur the Fighter!"

UP on the wall of Corinium once more, Arthur turned at last from gazing after the Saxon rear-guard. He looked at Echlann, scowling beside him, eyes on the departing foe. The Cornishman drew a deep breath, pushed back his wide-brimmed helm, brushed brown locks into place. He cleared his throat. "For men's truth of the best," he said, right hand extended.

Echlann's battered face turned redder than his whiskers. "We of Alban pay our scores!" he muttered ungraciously. But he took Arthur's hand.

"One thing still puzzles me," mused Arthur. "Belinic was a hard, cunning man, a sure-thing bettor. Yet he tried to lead the townsfolk out to their sure destruction. What could he gain from that?"

Echlann leaned against the parapet and roared, slapping his hairy thighs. "He-oro! After he slew the King on what the astrologer told him was a lucky night, Belinic trusted in his stars, as John the Assyrian read them for him. He asked John if he, Belinic, would ever lose a battle. . . . Now, what could the poor loon answer, and he needing Belinic's silver? He said 'No': so, Belinic had no fear of the Saxons. He was striking for the glory and power of kingship—but the astrologer lied to him."

"Did he?" asked Arthur, smiling. "Belinic did not quite lose Britain's battle—but he came deadly close."