THE SECRET MOUNTAIN

and Other Tales

BY

KENNETH MORRIS

WITH

ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

K. ROMNEY TOWNDROW

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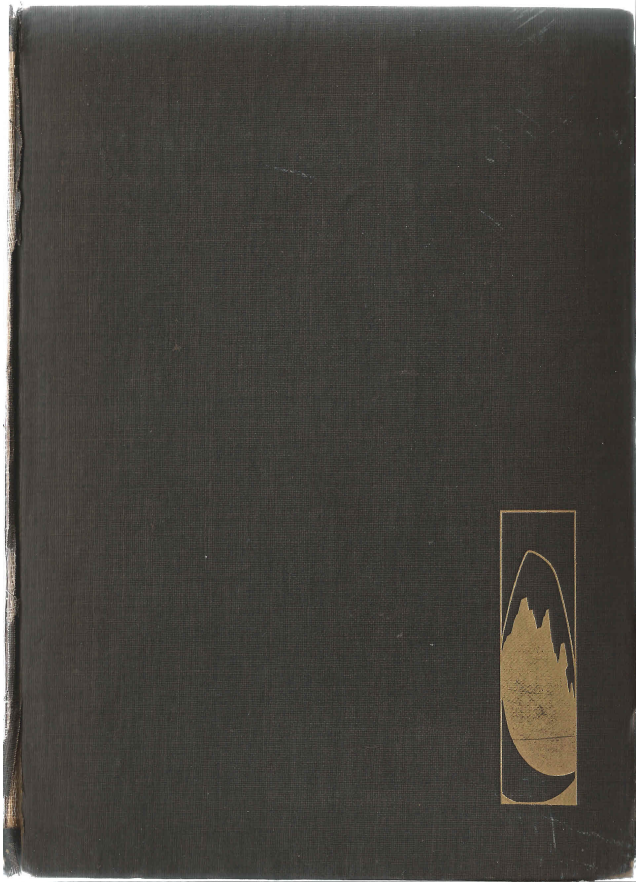

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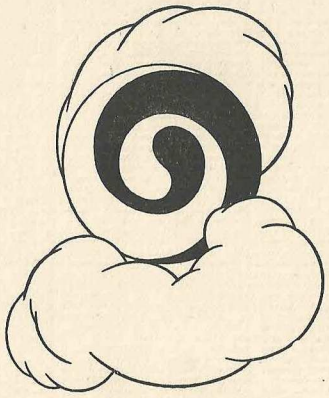

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To

R. MACHELL

In Memory of these many Years

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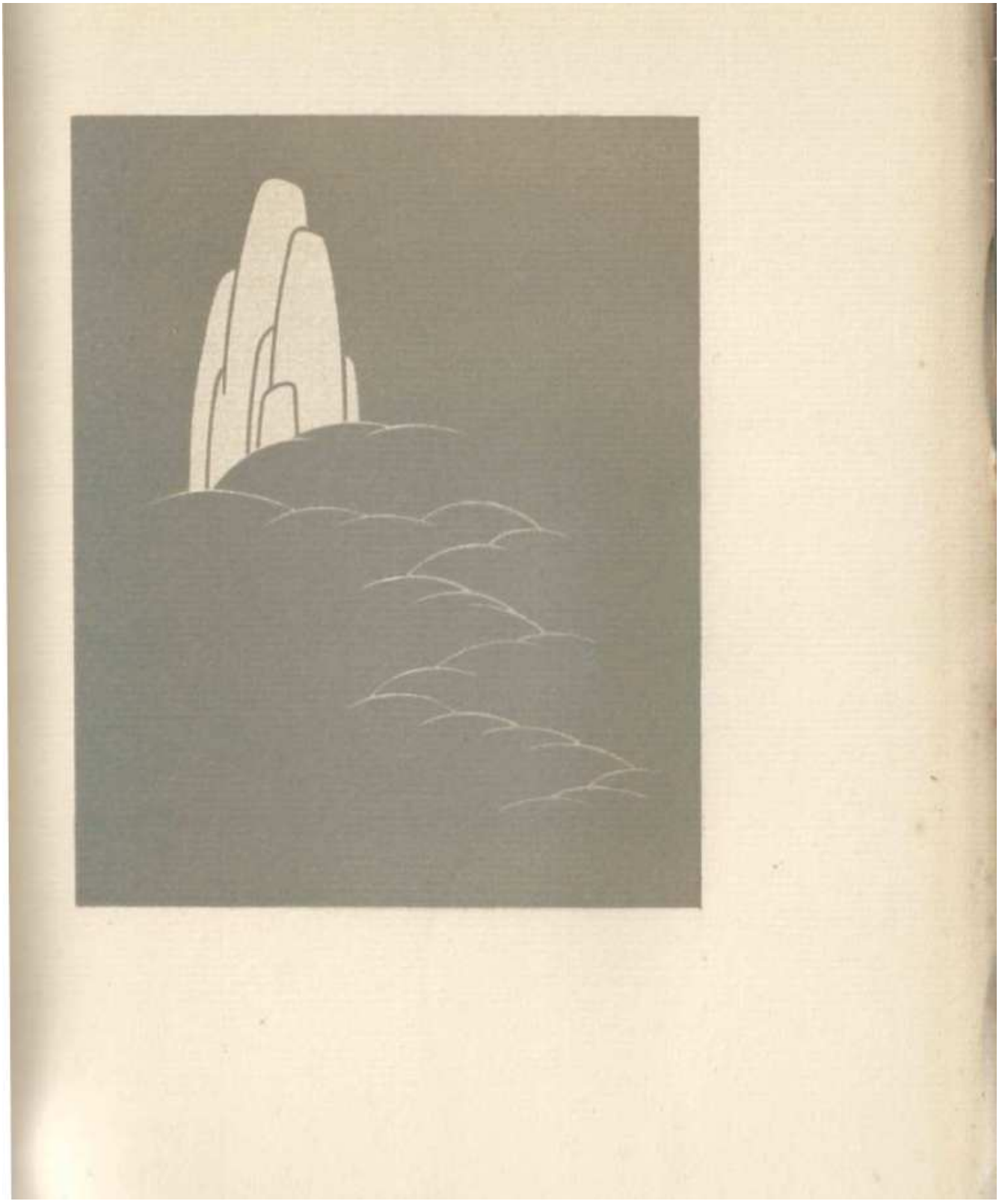

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THE SECRET MOUNTAIN

I

VARGLON FFLAMLAS, that was a slave in Babylon, dreamed a dream. Three dreams, indeed, it were better to say: since they came on three several nights, and each with a different story to tell. Or three chapters of one story; for the quality of it was ever the same, and such as to make the things of waking life—his fellow-slaves; the taskmaster; the courtyard, streets and palaces; the well from which he, yoked and blindfolded and going wearily round and round in a circle, drew water—seem as unreal as they were uninteresting.

The first night, then, he found himself in the midst of great splendours, but having a splendour within him greater than that without. He knew that up and down the world the sound of his name was going, and that men were praising him everywhere, and that no poet had fame like his fame, from Camelot to Xanadu, or from the Mountain Kaf to the bottom of the world. Nor did his honours lack foundation: his mind was all a wonder and extraordinary flame. He beheld the day sky traversed by beautiful deities and dragons, and the night on fire with the living palaces of the Gods; for him the sea was visibly the abode of hoary Thrones and Virtues; earth could not hide from him her magical inward continents and star-peopled promontories; men and women seemed to him great spirits under a thin disguise. . . .

He had come to his prime, he was aware, and his powers

were growing yearly; and now he had made one supreme poem which should be chanted by bards to come, certainly, as long as kings had courts or men built cities, and there were singers in either to keep them sweet with song. And this poem he was now to chant before the King of kings in Babylon. There sat that great monarch—with the face of one of his fellow-slaves, in whom he had never before noticed kingly qualities; there the king's daughter, whose hand should be the reward of his singing; there, all the familiar faces of the courtiers and great officials;—and he himself, he knew, the central and important figure on whom all eyes were set. He rose to begin, and felt the grand surge of inspiration upon him: heard the rushing of the wings of the Spirit, as they are heard when a man's mind is to be borne up to the splendid heights—and then a stranger came out of the crowd, and stood before him, and whispered something; and he faltered, and could not give his mind to the chanting, for visions that came to him of a Mountain afar in the forest, asserting a pearly whiteness, thrown up high above the billowing tree-tops, against the intense blue of heaven. And he was filled with longing for that Mountain; so that applause and riches and fame seemed nothing to him; and if the king's daughter's hand had been held out to him he would not have reached forth his to take it. And his great poem—went through after a sort to the end; and before that came the king yawned and began talking—in whispers certainly—to those who stood by the throne; and at the finish he received

conventional compliments, and the precise conventional reward; and all talk of the king's daughter's hand was tacitly dropped. And he went forth from the court to search the world for the Secret Mountain; and lived long, wandering, but died before he came by news of it. In the morning he looked on the faces of his fellow-slaves, and knew them for the faces of the great ones he had seen in his dream.

The day passed and night came; and no sooner had he lain down on his straw in the courtyard, and wrapped his leather cloak about him, than he was a great lord of battles among his hosts in the midst of a plain. His generals and captains were about him; his veterans that he had led to the conquest of many nations, in their chariots drawn up, a numberless multitude; and out in front was an embattled people against whom neither he nor any man had achieved victory since the world began. They were proud, gigantic, inordinate; they had come up out of the far seas with a boast and a challenge; empire by empire had fallen before them, even to the borders of the empires that had fallen before great Babylon itself. Now they were to be overthrown, and their conquests added to Babylon, and their princes were to be the slaves of the King of kings. And for himself, the victory would mean——

He gave the signal: the trumpets sounded; and rank by rank, cohort by cohort, all his chariots and horsemen and footmen were on the move, charging, wheeling, deploying; and he himself at the head of them. He felt the

wind blow in his face; saw the fluttering of banners; had great relish of the shock when it came.—And in the midst of the sound, the fury and the slaughter there fell a certain lull and hush, perhaps at the arresting scream of fifes of silver, perhaps at no signal at all; and he saw that on neither side were men busy with the killing, but weapons raised to strike stayed motionless in the air, and all heads and eyes were turned where, the giant enemies' ranks opening, One that was not of the giants at all, neither warrior nor herald, came unhurried and unharmed towards himself. Then he was filled with overmastering wonder who this man should be, and what his mission; and —as the two hosts had done—forgot the war in his eagerness to know. So this stranger came up, and stood beside and before his chariot—where indeed he *should* have been in grave danger from the hoofs of the right-hand horse of the pair—and looked him searchingly in the eyes, and said something: and what he said Varglon Fflamlas neither in the dream nor afterwards could discover: for it was all hidden away by a picture that came before his mind's eye at once: a billowing of leagues of tree-tops, and soaring up from them the faint colours and creamy snows of the Secret Mountain. And the memory of the world and its wars and of Babylon drifted away from him; and the battle became a thing that nowise concerned him, a meaningless tumult; and with dropped spear and rapt heart he bade his charioteer drive on, for he would go in search of the Mountain. And at that moment he saw the white

quiet lightning of the arrows, the terrible wind-driven snow of the arrows, the many-pointed death swift hurrying through the air; —and the dream was done. But waking, he considered this: that in this last dream he had had no memory at all of the other dream; and it seemed to him that he would have fought in the battle a thousand years before he failed with the song: that impression was quite strong with him; and yet in both dreams—in the second no less than in the first—the face of the Stranger had seemed familiar to him: it was a face he had known ages before; and the words spoken, could he but remember them, were words he had been wont to hear of old. And in the morning again he saw his generals and captains in his fellow-slaves; but there was none of them like the Stranger that had come to him on the battlefield. . . . And that day he began to search the faces of the passers-by in the streets; for the man, he thought, would be living, somewhere. . . .

The third night he dreamed: and now he was himself King of kings in Babylon, with splendour incalculable encompassing him at his goings forth and comings in; and they that waited upon him, and that prostrated themselves day and night at the foot of his throne, were themselves tributary kings and the rulers of vast empires—So once he held court in his palace, and gave judgment, and received tribute, and was at the full moon of his greatness. And there came One into the audience hall at whose entry all voices were hushed: who made no obeisance, but came

forward to the throne; and when he had spoken a word to the king, turned and went his ways.

Then he, Varglon Fflamlas the king, remembered the Secret Mountain of the Gods, and that it was his own original home. He sat there upon his throne, and spoke nothing, and the whole court was silent whilst he gave himself up to memories from of old that came taunting him upon the far horizons of his mind. But of this he was sure: he had once been a prince or some very high lord among the Gods that dwell on that Mountain; and what such lordship implied he half remembered: it was power, unusual, not like any wielded by man. How came he to have left those regions of the Immortals to take this paltry kingship, a man in the world of men? Had he heard a sound of Babylon in those days: of the great plain strewn nightly with a twinkle and glimmer that imitated the stars of heaven; of the gardens built up high into blue noon, colonnade on colonnade, terrace on sculptured terrace with many groves and fountains; of the might of world-conquering kings and the spells of enchanters; of the ships laden with the merchandise of Ophir and India: spices and sandalwood, nard and cassia, pearls and apes and peacocks and ivory:—had he heard of all these things and coveted them, or——?

He awoke in the courtyard of the slaves, homesick, and resolute to return home. Was not this, then, Great Babylon, his birthplace? Were not these the streets, quays, shops, palaces and warehouses that he had always

known ?—They seemed now quite foreign to him; utterly distasteful and antipathetic. He was not accustomed (after all his thirty years of this present life in it, and how many other lives before, who could say ?) to the everlasting roar and drone and pounding and tinkle; to the yelling of the criers and vendors; to the whole business of city life—Up there, where the large stars drooped luminous over the temple roofs, till it seemed you might almost light your taper at the flame of Rigel or of Betelgeux; there where the windows of the high palaces caught the glory of the Chaldæan sunsets and dawns; where the slim moon, and Astarte's star, haunted the topmost storeys of the Hanging Gardens: —there, indeed, Babylon, you were a queen. But you hid your splendours from the slaves; in the courtyards and hot street-gullies of the downtrodden and the ghouls of vice, your seeming was no lovelier than other cities'. Varglon Fflamlas, treading your paved ways wistfully, searched all faces for a glimpse of the one face that should make him less forlorn; and had no more interest in your beauty or your vileness than the possibility of that discovery might lend. But always, night and day, that vast sea of tree-tops flickered and whispered before his inner senses, and from it rose as an island the Secret Mountain, a white plume in the sky, a creamy faintness or icy glitter hung in mid-heaven. And sometimes, it seemed to him, he came quite near remembering those who had been his companions there, and what manner of work it had been theirs to perform.

II

All the world was Babylon's; there was no fear of a slave escaping. The penalties of failure were too great; the chances of success too small. The man who owned this Varglon Fflamlas desired a message taken to the slave-master at one of his country-houses; and it fell to the lot of Varglon Fflamlas to take it. So he set out: with no intent, or formulated wish even, to escape,—but with the proud vision of the Mountain continually before his inward eye.

He delivered himself of his charge, but was not delivered from his obsessing idea. Escape? No; he had no relish for a crucifixion. He turned conscientiously enough to go back to the city. In the dusk of the evening he fell in with a man whose face, surely, he knew . . . and walked beside him a mile, talking absently. Then the man left him, saying, 'You are on the right road; go forward!' He went on until moonrise, with a strange excitement growing on him always; then discovered the cause of his excitement: the man he had been with was the one he had seen in his dreams, and watched for since. . . .

And then, his mind being freed to take note of outer things, he saw that the road he had taken—the one the Stranger had led him into and bidden him continue therein—was not the way he had travelled in the morning, nor one he had taken ever; but the certainty was in his mind, that it was exceedingly good to be travelling it now. The

truth is he had taken the Old Road which the giants or the dwarfs built for Arthur anciently: the Old Road between Camelot and Babylon, the Forest Road, where no man comes. It never occurred to him to think that he was a slave escaping, or that he was safe or unsafe; all he knew was that momently the air grew sweeter and more divinely familiar; that somewhere ahead rose the Mountain, like a white finger in heaven beckoning to him to come.

So presently he traversed wide Elfinmere, and came to the tree-clad hills of Nanrossa, going up through the Gap of Nanrossa, where the Delectable Forest begins. A great flood of delight poured out through him from his inmost being; he was at home, or near it; his home-sickness was gone.

Down into Nanrossa Bottom, just beyond the Gap: and now which way should he turn? Up and leftward to the dark hill where Phenit Fireheart keeps guard among his pines; or where the green drive, flagged with the giants' huge pavement a foot or two beneath the sward, leads by a gentle ascent to the right through the oakwoods of Darron Hên the God of Oaktrees?—He would keep to the Old Road—And there among the hundred branched ministrants of Darron the Aged, he felt certain he was on the right way. It all tallied with the memories of his third and greatest dream. He was breathing the air of his home-land; his soul burgeoned within him into singing, into surprising knowledge, into a grandeur he could not have believed in before. These trees were the things he

knew, and that belonged to him: the rustle of their dear leaves laved away Babylon from his mind. The porticoes and gardened terraces, the quays and courtyards, the squalour and splendour: tush! they had no real being; they were but the aftermath, haunting the outskirts of memory, from some ugly drug-begotten nightmare. . . . But the trees were ancient and friendly companions; participants with him aforetime in some delicate elder wisdom. Inner and inner selves awoke in him, responding to their large unlaboured invitation. . . .

All that wood which covers the northern slope of the valley, after you have passed through the Gap: where each oak has its own spacious domain or holding, and leave to cover what extent of ground it will: seemed to him suffused or pregnant with a consciousness akin to his own, but quiet, golden, unworld-weary, expectant, withholding secrets. Only just withholding them. It was but to bide here a little while, he thought, to have his mind so stilled and his memory so cleared and settled that the right word would come to him, the right language; and he would call forth answering speech with it from these leafy titans that quivered so friendlily through all their pendent greenness. Then he would inquire of them as to the way to the Secret Mountain; and they would not fail to tell him.

As he stood there brooding and partaking of the peace, and watching the sunlight westward on the gold-green tremulance of the tree-tops, and the deep leaf-walled ravine between the trees, and the drive in its emerald and

dew-silver at the bottom, where it ran down, edged with bracken, into a glimpse of sunbright mystery beyond that could be seen between trunks and beneath low branches —something definite of memory did indeed come to him. He pictured a person appropriate to this solitude, and remembered a name out of lives and lives foregone. '*Darron Hên!*' he said; 'yes; it was this place was haunted by Darron the Aged.' The likeness that went with the name was that of an old man: druid-like, white-bearded and oakleaf-crowned; very straight and majestic of form; eyes exceedingly bright and deep and wise and kindly. Yes; he remembered the Oak-God well; and knew that he had been one of his kinsmen on the Secret Mountain, when the Gods foregathered in that their arcane capital. And he remembered a chant of invocation they had been wont to use, to call to each other in the forest; it came back to him word by word, phrase by phrase, dropping into his mind with golden ripples of gladness; and he sang it there among Darron's own trees, and waited with confidence for that bright ancient to glimmer into visibility. But no shining form appeared, nor even could he come by hearing an answer; though it seemed to him that the leafage trembled as if with a remembered delight and blushed into more luminous green at hearing him.

He sat down on a fallen trunk, and gave himself over to happy ponderings. 'Yes, yes,' thought he; 'we used to ride through the air over the unsolid green leagues . . . our passage was like a shooting or a streaming of flame, like

the burning voyage of a meteor or a dragon. We were not human, like the people of Babylon.' So he brooded, gathering up the threads of antique memories; and with hardly a shadow of unease on him that he could get no news of Darron Hên.

He left the oakwood, and went down through the leaf-walled gully; he would search the green wild forest through, but he would find the Mountain of his dreams. All that spring he wandered on; highly hopeful for the most part; often making songs as he went: it was not so wonderful that, after all these thousands of years, he should have some difficulty in finding the way. He heard the cuckoo calling as she flew, beyond his vision, between the blue and the green: it seemed to him a voice from an elder age; remote, friendly, of happy omen. He heard the minstrelsy of the blackbird in the birchwoods; the missel-thrush making bardism among the high beeches. The like of these you should not find in Babylon; cymbal and sackbut, shawm, dulcimer and psaltery: the king's musicians with all their music: were not comparable to these. Again and again he came on places he would have said he had known of old. In the secret reaches of the forest: in valleys bright with gorse, tender with heather; where the mosses glowed copper-golden and dusky and green, and the bog-cotton lifted its lonely grace, and the air was sweet with bog-myrtle: it was strange how the knowledge of his old divinity came dropping, came stealing into his mind. In the pillared sombreness of the high

beeches his imaginings grew in augustness; in the sun-soaked green places where lizards lightened, what dross of mortality remained on him slipped away. The grand revelation seemed always trembling on the verge of his memory; but there were absences he could not understand. The places were there, and the beauty; but Those that had been the soul and essence of them were gone. —In a glade where dewdrops sparkled on the fern, and the green of the turf was misted over with morning silver, a fire-shape delicately beautiful came to his mind, and he remembered distinctly the being and name of Taimaz the Dew-Queen; but he might invoke her with the song she had answered of old, and chant it never so sweetly, and get no reply but from the thrushes. . . .

He went on through the summer: when July, dark blue and proud and beautiful, July with the Egyptian eyes, brooded in the heavens; when silence pondered in the palaces of leaves, and no birds sang. August came, light-footed over the beech-tops, diffusing a fine remote gold through the air. In the purple of dusk he passed through the pinewoods, and saw the sky flame in the spaces between the dark needle-tufts and the ruddy trunks and boughs. He thought of Phenit Fireheart, whose shadowy ruby-dark mantle had often made a glow of twilight his eyes had seen of old among the pines. But where was Phenit, that one might get no news of him now? Ah, where were the forms of flame and light that had been wont to burn so beautifully once across the beautiful burning

of the sky? There was a solitude in the forest, that bore no correspondence to his memories and dreams.

He made for all high places; he scanned the world from any eminence where a break in the trees gave freedom to his vision. There were green and lofty hills to be seen often; but never that one pearl-white plume, that tall sky-reaching beauty faint in its snows, that shone so clearly before his inner eye.

Often he came on the faery hosts riding the heather moors under the stars; and would have questioned them—but that they had no eyes that could see him, it seemed, at that time; and no ears that could hear his voice. So in growing loneliness he went on, right through the heart of the forest: through golden days and grey; through the sunlight that maintained its silence aloof, and the haste of the little Rain-Gods, always hurrying away quietly, that had no word to say to him. He remembered that his life of old upon the Mountain had not been idle wandering. Sometimes he thought that the beauty and secrecy of the forest were coming to elude him, because he had no high office to perform.

He journeyed westward through the autumn; through the flaming of the leaves and their waning; through their silent falling and drifting down. His joy was dimmed into quietude, his hope into grey resolution; he sang but little as he wandered. When the storms of winter were riding over the naked trees: when the beech-tops were sullen dun and purple, and the low skies grape-dark above

them: he came to the edge of the forest and the wild wrathfulness of the sea; and still he had caught no glimpse of the Mountain of his home, nor seen anything of his ancient companions. Sadness overmastered him; great longings took him; at times he thought with dread of Babylon—of the flaunting scarlet and golden glory; of the wasted life, the empty days, the riot and desperate gloom.

He turned back from the sea, and into the forest again; and all that year wandered seeking. With the spring the great life flowed back to him, and he was less an exile in his home. He came to remember the language of the wild bees and the swallows; the speech of the fairies and the little Rain-Gods; how to address the blackbird, that he might not take offence; what to say to the missel-thrush in April; what to the cuckoo; what to the great white owl in the twilight of August under the pines; what to the water-wagtail by the stream; what to the kingfisher flashing green and blue in the woodland silence by still waters.—In the open glades, then, he would come upon the moonlight dancers; and they would gather around him, awestruck at the presence of a God, but silent with pity and sorrow to see the paleness of the flame-plume above his head and his eyes with their sadness and longing. *Did they know the way to the Secret Mountain?* At that they vanished away, sighing; there was something terrible, inexplicable, in such as he putting that question to them; he should not have done it. They were sensible, I suppose, of the presence of tragedy; and it cut into their lives and

made them aware of the dreaded thing pain. They had no help for him. 'I sing of it always,' said Bard Blackbird; 'can you not hear me?' or again, 'How can I tell you more than is in my song?' (There is always a dash of tart gaiety in his bardism.) 'Hush!' said the kingfisher; and dived after some gliding streak in the peat-brown lights and shadows of the water. '*Mi wn, mi wn*!—I know, I know!' cooed the woodpigeon, as she always does; but would vouchsafe no information. So continually disappointed he wandered on.

In midwinter he came back to Nanrossa. To Phenit Fireheart's pinewood, with one faint whipped-up hope in him. But the snow lay inches thick on the branches and needle-tufts, and the place was cold and ghostly and lonely, and Phenit Fireheart was not there. To Darron's Oakwood: and the bare trees seemed to him as to a returning wanderer the ruined walls that once were his home. To Nanrossa Tower above the Gap, and to looking out over snow-covered Elfinmere under the grey indefinite skies and under the howling of the wolfish wind. He thought of Borion of the Golden Flame, how he used to come riding up at dawn over the marsh; he thought of Gwernlas the Lady of the Alders; and of all that by wood and glade and mere were the kindling flames and inward sweetness of the beauty of the forest. 'Where are they?' he said; and again, 'alas, where are they?' Not in the forest now, he knew; nor in the mute white waste of Elfinmere. And the Secret Mountain?—Of this only he could be sure: that

he should never find it, wandering in those deserted regions; that he had lost the clue, or that his present eyes were unsuited for the vision. Then he thought of Babylon: of them that danced before the king clad in soft scarlet, and of them that crawled the kennels leprous or mutilated; of the loud brazen music of trumpets and shawms; of the flaunting splendour and hidden agony; the golden and crimson pageantry, and the squalid places of filth and shame. Was he a God, and doing nothing?

He went down, and took the fateful Old Road from Camelot to Babylon, and journeyed eastward, the way he came.

Hourly as he went, new memories came crowding upon him. He was aware of the things the Gods knew: their pride and their compassion ensouled him. What would he do? —Why, wage Their wars in Babylon. He remembered Their eternal project; and how they wait upon times and cycles, and are intent to conquer the world at last. He was one of them, and their warfare also was his own; even though for thousands of years he had taken no conscious hand in it. But he would make some campaign of it now, there in the great city. The Gods' war is unlike any other: it calls not for cohorts and large battalions; one man may be a puissant army; he is not lonely who singlehanded holds a planet for the Gods. A planet—or his own heart for that matter. There were high adventures for a God—for a slave—to undertake in Babylon.

He was within a day's journey of the city, and near the

place where he had turned off from the populous ways into the Old Road for Nanrossa and the forest. There, at nightfall, from a high eminence, he looked forth, and saw the plain all about, and the sky above the plain, lit as it were with the watchfires of a grand encampment, and the far horizons luminous with vast rainbow-coloured pavilions. A man overtook him as he came there, and greeted him; he knew afterwards that it was the One who had come to him in his dreams, but did not recognize him then. 'What is it?' said Varglon Fflamlas, pointing to the unusual glory of fires. 'These last years' said the other 'the Gods lay siege to Babylon; they await the one who is to open the gates to them.' In a moment the sun had set; the vision was gone; and with it the man who had been standing at his side. No saying but Varglon Fflamlas had dreamed.

He came into the city; he made three days' journey through Babylon, proclaiming the things the Gods know. He saw the dancers in their soft scarlet; the merchants, the thieves, the rich men and the fallen. They all were unconcealed from him: he saw them for gods obscured, angels banished, souls hidden under oblivion, the pilgrims of a thousand lives. Crowds listened to him on the quays and in all the public places. Then said one, 'Is not this Varglon Fflamlas, the slave who escaped?' News of his coming reached his former master; he was taken before the judges presently, and condemned.

At dawn punishment was meted out to him according to the law. Towards evening, looking up from his cross,

he saw in the midst of the blue sky, far above the huge porticoes and onyx columns and palaces all alabaster and polished porphyry, far above the Hanging Gardens of the king—a drifting together of clouds, and the likeness in them of a white plume-like mountain, faint in its creamy and pearly snows; and from that moment he despised his bodily pain; and by nightfall had gone forth to his own. . . .

In the night the city gates were opened from within, and the Gods entered Babylon; there to reign, it is said, for a thousand years or more.