

## Chapter II

ON the next morning the cat and I held council—we had slept together on the previous night for the sake of the companionship of the other. “Black cat of the witch,” said I, after gazing long at him steadfastly and with much thought, “do thou that are skilled in Sorcery lead and I will follow,” and with that I laid my hand lightly on the beast’s head, and it looked up into my eyes unafraid and as a friend might do. After which, with tail erect and moustachios pointing right and left, it went inland, I following, and for two days and a night we journeyed through thick woods, with here and there a rich plain that was as fair a pasture land as are the marshes around Romney Town.

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Towards the vesper hour on the second day of our wanderings we came to a hill on whose crest stood a fair castle, which, though nowise old or a-crumbing, yet looked neglected and forsaken, being much overgrown with mosses, weeds, and climbing plants that flourish with great vigour in Southern lands, and grow there in one year more than such things grow in ten years in our own country.

“Black cat,” said I, “let us enter,” and together we strode up the hillside to a fair gate, that was arched and had ornaments of wrought-iron to its face of strong wood. This gate was let into the castle wall over against a round tower, such as I have seen at Windsor as a boy at the castle of King Harry that had six wives. Round about us reigned a death-like silence, and from the castle came no sound. I looked up, marvelling, at the rank grasses and untended growths, at the

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window glass whereon the dust and grime lay thick, at the weather-stained masonry, and beyond, at the garden about the castle, where grew neither fruit nor flower, nothing but worthless plants and common weeds such as were in the woods through which we had passed on our way thither.

Greatly I wondered as to who might dwell in this deserted palace, and I looked around for means of entry. Over on the gate was a large knocker of bronze and shaped like an open hand stretched out in welcome. It was on a hinge and the knuckles were thick and heavy, so that when it fell the noise might be the greater. I reached out my hand, and was about to raise the knocker and clamour at the gateway, when I bethought me of poor Thomas Snoad and the fate that had overtaken him.

“Black cat,” said I, “there be strategy and there be cunning, and

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wherefore, did I lack these arts, were I, Silas Fordred, master-mariner?”

With that I unfastened my belt of good leather, that cost me one groat and a penny at Canterbury fair, and I lifted up the bronze hand with the belt that I had wound around it, and, behold, the bronze fingers clutched the belt, closed as do lion's claws—yea, even as the arms of the idol had closed on poor Thomas Snoad. I laughed loud to myself at the sight, and the cat, too, did laugh, for I had escaped a cruel device and had outwitted some uncommon malignant sorcerer. High I swung the hand with my good leather thong, and then I loosed my hold and the fist fell back with a crash, while, at the same instant, the gateway opened wide from the inside, and without human aid. By the waning daylight I could see a broad hall, tiled and paved, with rich rugs and skins on the floor; the walls were hung with tapes-

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tries and designs made of rare spears, bucklers and swords. Here and there were low couches that looked soft and inviting—it was a fair sight for eyes and body that had not rested on comfort and ease for many months. The sun was sinking fast—and the darkness approaches quick in these lands,—so I thought it unwise to enter the castle at this late hour and resolved to spend that night on the hillside, deeming it safer to rest there than in the great hall. The black cat, whom I had named Satan for a jest, lay by my side as on the other nights, he being by now mighty trustful of me and friendly. Ever and anon our eyes wandered through the darkness to the black outline of the castle, and, though there were many windows, we saw no light or sign of light in any one of the rooms. Only once I thought I could see a faint glimmer, as of a lamp, shine from the round window in the turret; but I

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looked again and it was gone, and I looked again and it was a moonbeam that had painted a patch of silver on the pane. On the morrow, when the sun stood clear in the sky, and after I had bathed and drank water from a running stream so that all my wits might be with me, I entered at the castle gate. The brazen hand was still clenched over my belt of leather.

Satan was the first to enter the hall, a great chamber with many doors let into the wall on either side, while at the far end rose a broad stairway, which we ascended without mishap.

It would be idle were I to describe what was in that castle; suffice to say, it was like a nobleman's palace, with chairs of carved wood-work and great beds with spreading canopies, such as I have seen at the Palace at Hampton Court, by aid of my friend, Roger the Ratcatcher, who doth dwell in that famous abode.

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With great caution we peered into many chambers, and no harm befell; and when we had descended the stairway and explored the rooms about the great hall, we passed yet beyond to where there were kitchens and store-rooms, where we found stacks of dried fruits and vegetables, also sealed tins that we broke, and wherein were large pieces of flesh—beef and pork and the tongues of oxen.

We sat us down and feasted until our insides could be no more distended, and, our thirst being then far stronger than our hunger, we arose, thinking to go down to the stream that ran beside the hill whereon stood the castle, there to drink our fill of water.

Now, as once more we crossed the great hall, a marvellous strange thing befell. I had trodden on a square tile—it was green in colour, being the centre-piece of the design that orna-

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mented the paving,—and this green tile yielded under my foot, so that, fearing some new witchcraft, with a deadly fear at my heart, I sprang high up into the air. It was a mercy that my legs were well up under me, for as a flash there swung 'twixt wall and wall a long blade of steel shaped as a giant sword. It passed low down, just above the head of Satan, the cat, just below the soles of my feet. It was a marvellous cunning piece of sorcery, for was I not bound to light once more on that green tile—so broad it was—and yet again, and yet again, till I should be quite tired, and without strength to spring, and then—I shuddered. Three times I jumped high into the air, like to a girl that skips with a rope, only this rope of mine was a steel knife, sharp and keen, and I thought many things, and all of them very terrible and uncomfortable; and three times the long steel blade hissed

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by, low down and from wall to wall. A fourth time I lighted on the green tile, but on this occasion the spell worked not; true, the sword issued forth as before, yet, instead of flashing 'twixt wall and wall, it swerved in its course, hesitated, and then fell harmless to the ground, dead and without power. The charm that had caused it to chop to and fro had failed. I touched it lightly with my forefinger, and it did not stir; I handled it yet more familiarly and it moved not. It was a long blade, long as the hall was broad, somewhat rusty and ill-looking it was for lack of armourer's care, yet sharp withal and of a fine temper.

"Yea," I thought, "the magic of the devil, thy smith, hath left thee, thanks be to God, for truly thou art an evil device and an unholy;" and, as in a dream, I saw myself springing into the air, till at last, weak and feeble, I could spring no more; and what I then

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perceived caused me to shudder anew. I went from the prostrate blade back to the green tile and trod upon it with the end of one foot, and the long knife quivered like an animal wounded in the chase and a-dying, yet it stirred not from the ground. "Magic blade that art no longer magic, thy strength is gone!" I said aloud, and with that I broke off the end of the sword with my two hands, that were protected by a cloth I had taken from one of the couches that stood around. I stooped and sweated, and my face was purple, yet, ere I had done, the huge blade was in five pieces, and powerless to do further harm.

It was with a greater thirst than before that Satan and I sped downhill to the stream. Here we drank our fill, and it was good to be once more out in the open air under the free sky, with naught to fear and no care at our hearts. The rest of that day we sat in

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the cool shade of a wood, listening to the apes and birds of coloured plumage that chattered in the trees.

Satan, the black cat, lies dead and unburied in a strange land, and no human eye marked his death. His last hour was perchance the most evil in both our lives, and maybe in that hour I had no thought for him or he for me; yet now, in my security, I think daily on him, and there rise tears to my eyes, for he was dear to me and I to him, and the dangers that we shared together I shall never forget. In the night I again ascended the hill and wandered around and about the castle, for a spirit of unrest possessed me and I could not sleep. No light was visible from any window, and all was black and inanimate as before. On the round window of the turret the same patch of moonlight silvered the pane, yet there was no moon in the skies, naught but an army of stars, wondrous

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bright and near to earth, as are the stars of all distant lands.

Later I slept deep, yet, ere my eyes closed, I had pondered much over that patch of moonlight on the round window of the turret; for albeit there was no moon visible in the sky, a moon-ray pale and argentine it most certainly was that I had seen, and I resolved that I would ascend to the turret and seek to discover from whence sprang this strange light that had so puzzled me.

On the morrow Satan and I once more set out for the storeroom in search of meat. Again we ate our fill, and our appetites were very great and pressing. From this chamber there led underground a stone stairway that we afterwards descended, cautiously, and one foot moving slow after the other. The walls of this stairway were damp and mildewed, and when we reached the cellar below the air was

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humid and lifeless as a stagnant tarn. There were holes in the walls, through which streamed pale rays of light, so that we discovered the nature of this underground chamber without great mystery or labour. Underfoot was the naked earth without flagstone or paving, and, on all sides, stretched a huge crypt, a ceiling of many curves supported by numberless pillars. At Canterbury Cathedral, where lie the bones of St. Thomas à Becket, is just such a crypt, though vaster far than the one Satan and I explored that morning. There were many casks about us, and goodly flasks of glass and earthenware that held rich wines and oils; also were there quaintly-painted chests filled with the dried leaf of some unknown plant. I drank sparingly of the rich wines that we had discovered, tasting of many sorts and colours; and each was of a quality rarer and more costly than any liquor

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I had drunk before. The dust and cobwebs lay thick on all that was about us, and I thought that few men had drunk wine of so old a vintage; yet, because of the sorcery that was all about us, I restrained my natural desires and forbode to drink more than I could carry without detriment to my reason and good sense, knowing full well that I should want all the wits I was possessed of, even on that day as on the previous days.

Further on in this great cellar was a space with a palisade of wood all about it, and within were barrels, two or three of which had their heads stove in, so that their contents were spread on the ground beside them. I climbed the palisade and Satan pressed with his body through the bars.

“Gunpowder, as I live!” I cried, fingering the black grains that strewed the ground. I had no great use of so dangerous a neighbour, and yet,

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thought I, "If the sorceries and dangers with which I am hourly beset cease not, maybe I shall lose patience and send this castle and all its witchcrafts a-flying into the air;" for I looked not upon this store of gunpowder with dread, as some men might have done, but as an ally, for stood it not at my service as much as at the use of any other man? Satan and I then proceeded further through the crypt-like cellar, and at the further end was yet another stairway. This we ascended as carefully as was our wont, and soon we were standing in a vast apartment that we had heretofore been unaware of. This new chamber was quite unlike any of the others through which we had passed, being bare and huger than any dwelling-room, with a ceiling high and vaulted; indeed, it was in shape more like the inside of a church than a room in a nobleman's palace. In this chamber were anvils and

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moulds, and furnaces empty and idle; here also were strange machines whose uses I could in no way surmise; and all these things were rusty and red, and discoloured with unuse. This chamber reminded me of a vast smithy, only it was of another and a more cunning nature than any smith's shop that I had ever seen. Around the walls were shelves whereon stood great jars and caskets, and there were chests that had drawers that were filled with carpenter's stores,—screws and nails and gimlets and files and rivets. There were also boxes full of thin sticks of wood with a red substance at their end, and I rubbing two such together, they burst into flame. Then I bethought me of the gunpowder in the cellar below, and I put a box of these fire-makers in my pouch, so that I could act at a short notice.

I marvelled greatly at the long rows of jars, many of which were of glass,



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so that I could see that they were filled with coloured liquids, and all of them bore inscriptions in a strange tongue—for a strange tongue it must have been, the words being written with English characters, yet conveying no meaning to me as I spelt them out. From one such a jar I took the cover, and there arose a smell most nauseous, so that I had much ado that I might not vomit. Yet one more jar did I uncover, and there arose fumes into the air about me, ruddy brown in colour, and of an evil quality, so thick and foul that I was nigh suffocated when these vapours entered at my mouth. There was a large doorway at the end of the chamber, and to this both Satan and I scampered quick. We opened it, and before us was the forsaken garden that was about the castle. We stood long on the threshold, exceeding thankful for air that was pure and of good odour.

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The gateway through which we had passed opened out on to the back of the castle, and before us lay the tangled desolation of the garden that had fallen to such lamentable decay. There were seats and arbours, all moss-grown and scarcely recognisable, and we sat us down and pondered over the things that were about us, marveling much how it was that they were there, and how it was that their present plight was so lonesome and untended.

“ ’Tis like the fable of the Brier Rose, friend Satan,” I said, as I scratched the top of his head, and then I smacked my lips together. “ Maybe I shall kiss the princess,” I continued, “ and she will awake and chide me for a hairy-faced varlet.” My hand was on my chin and I could feel my beard grown long and thick, and never a barber’s shop would I, Silas Fordred, enter for many a long

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day. My hair, too, was long and unkempt, and truly had a princess gazed on me, I fear greatly that she would have turned on her side and essayed to sleep once more.

With such like thoughts I wandered through the tangled bushes and network of creeping plants, that plucked at my feet and tripped me up, while the green tendrils tapped at my face and curled round my fingers, filling the air with a moist odour, somewhat rank, yet not displeasing. We had proceeded thus slowly for some hundreds of yards, when we came to an open space where stood three buildings that had closed doors. Each of these structures was of stone, low in the roof and of simple form, and, from their shape, it was easy to tell that they consisted of but a single chamber. These we passed and repassed with much curiosity, but by now we had grown prudent and slow of action—

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aye, even fearful,—so that we were content to return to the woods as on the previous day, to idle away the time and bethink us of the morrow.

It was quite silent in the wood, save for the stirring of leaves and the cries and motions of bird and beast, and Satan sat on blissfully at my side, with his head resting on his outstretched paws. On a sudden, however, the black cat rose to his feet with hair erect and his body forming an archway, while his claws came forth from their sheath.

“What is it, friend Satan?” I cried. I looked in the direction of his eyes, and true, there was cause for alarm. Gazing straight at us, and some little distance away, was a man all naked and hairy, as is an ape.

I rose to my feet and saw that he had no weapon. This gave me some courage, so that I called aloud:

“Hairy man! who art thou, and what would'st thou?”

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He made no answer, and there was a look of terror on his face—'twas brown in colour, of a somewhat lighter hue than a Negro's.

"Come hither, thou man-ape," I said, loud and clear.

He gave a shrill cry, and then turning round he fled into the wood. I followed as fast as I was able, yet this hairy man was lithe and agile as is a greyhound, so that ere I had run many yards I had lost all trace of him. Breathless I returned to Satan, the cat.

"Eater of man's flesh," I said, "we be not alone. Perchance this is a land of hairy men—and sorcerers."

Satan, the cat, purred his agreement.

"We must watch and wait," said I, "and heaven above will help us; for, cat, though thy hue be black, thou hast borne thee like a true Christian," and I drew him toward me and rubbed his black face against my cheek with much affection.

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That day we saw no more of the hairy man, nor did we see other man or woman of like breed and nature. In the night, as I gazed upward to the castle on the hill, the patch of silver light was again visible on the turret window. I resolved that on the next day I would ascend the stairway and explore the tower, which as yet I had not entered; for there was no moon in the sky, and I marvelled greatly as to the why and how of that patch of silver light that shone each night on the turret window without apparent cause or natural source.