

The Amazons in Sain Arien:

Part One

in the south of Hera
The first thing the Amazons brought to Sain Arien was music. On that fine spring day when three hundred soldiers marched down the main street, the little market town had not for many a year heard such a rousing and heart-cheering sound. Long side-drums pounded, horns halloved and flute-pipes trilled an infectious tune from the west that seemed familiar even on its first hearing and set every foot stepping in its rhythm.

The whole town had come to see them, of course, and people from the surrounding villages for several miles around, and truly they were a fine sight to be seen; banners streaming in the wind, purple, blue and gold; pennants and standards; triumphs of a dozen campaigns fought on their eastward march from the sea. Gleaming helms and breastplates in silver, leather and bronze; shields and spears, and the maids themselves; taller, for the most part, than the maids of the middle-world, and made to look taller yet by the high horsehair plumes upon their helmets. Disciplined and self-possessed, yet with an air of gaiety about them. They were the products of a rigorous training which had honed them to perfection in the practice of the martial arts, yet had taught them primarily as a way of contemplation and a

spiritual discipline. Nevertheless, they were not contemplatives or mystics in the true sense, they were young women fully devoted to the life of outward activity, at a peak of physical condition and alive with animal spirits. To this their spiritual training had added a calmness and control, a depth and wisdom, which was the foundation both of their courage and of their courtesy.

For the Amazons were renowned for their courtesy and generosity both to the peoples of their captured nations and to their conquered enemies (who were usually foreign invaders of those nations from the barbaric patriarchal tribes of the North and East). A few cynics said that they were only trying to purchase the support of the people; but for the most part even those who could not see that their gentleness proceeded from a far deeper source found such 'purchase' considerably preferable to the methods of enforcing ^{support} which had been employed by one patriarchal army after another: killing of children, burning of homesteads, maiming of livestock, and, of course, the continual plunder of the harvests. After all, the only 'support' an army really needs from the people is their obedience, and it can easily get that without purchasing it.

As one patriarchal army drove out another in these bitter years before ^{coming of the} the Amazon crusade, each one came to relieve the tyranny of the one before it and to bring new and better gods, and each was as bad as, or worse than its predecessor,

or even if there was some small improvement, that was more than offset by the hardships inflicted by the war. As for the gods, they all looked remarkably like the kings who brought them, and behaved similarly also.

Thus, when the rumours of the great Amazon army first reached the citizens of the middle-world, there was little rejoicing. A new army to sweep away oppression and to establish the worship of the one true God. Yes, one had heard all that many times before. Perhaps a ray of hope was kindled when it became known that this was the old Faith that had prevailed before the chaos had begun; the God of the old Temples, to whom each of the male godlings had in turn been 'married', taking her as his 'consort'; yet ironically, this very piece of blasphemy had led to great confusion in the religious sense of the people, not least because the majority of those endowed with understanding had risen furiously and unthinkingly against it, and so had been slain many years ago.

In any case, an army was an army, whatever it fought for. What could it mean, this great Great Crusade, except more looting, more burning, more maiming? But as this Crusade advanced steadily through the continent, it became known that this was an army like no other army. When before had teams of soldiers rebuilt burned houses? When before had an army brought with an Order of white-robed sisters, many of whom, skilled in the medical arts, spread out into the

healing the disease and suffering that had been spread by the wars, towns and villages, and teaching not some politically-motivated state religion, but a way of inner peace? When before had land taken by previous conquerors been given back to its original owners, and the reigns of government put back into the hands of the local people, while the soldiers helped to put the devastated farmsteads back into order? Never before had these things happened, and never before had an army been garlanded with flowers by the people of a city as it marched into the main street; yet all these things became familiar occurrences as the Great Crusade carved its inescapable way path eastward.

From the Amazons, people learned that an army could be trusted and that a firm, sound and dependable order could arise out of chaos. And from the white-robed Innocent (meaning "The Unarmed"), the teaching and healing Order that marched with them, and were popularly known as "White Amazons", they gained a re-awakening of spiritual understanding. The babble of religious claims and counter-claims, all motivated by political interests, was suddenly silenced by a single voice, clear, sweet and thrilling, speaking the ancient Truth known from time immemorial, and still remembered by many from their childhood: "One God alone, none other God there be."

The Amazon rule was strict yet gentle. Its aim was to clean up the chaos as quickly as possible, but without undue severity.

There were no widespread reprisals after an Amazon victory. Those guilty of rape, torture or the desecration of a Temple were summarily executed. Men guilty of beating their wives, or of other acts of violence against maids, together with priestesses and other Temple officers guilty of apostasy, unless committed under extreme pressure, were publicly whipped with birch-rods. Other than this there was a general amnesty on all crimes committed during the period of non-matriarchal rule; "the time without the Law". Even these laws were administered leniently, with every consideration being given to extenuating circumstances; and even the whippings, although certainly a salutary chastisement, were very far removed from the ingenious and long drawn-out torture practised by the various patriarchal juntas. Their whole purpose was to restore the balance and, having purified the transgressors, to allow them to return to life within the Law. "The sin being purged, let it no more be spoken of" said one Amazon edict.

For the real meaning of the Great Crusade lay far deeper than the clearing up of human chaos and tyranny. It was the re-establishing^{ment} of the Divine Order and Harmony in the middle-world. For this neither vindictiveness nor retribution were necessary, but "the unmaking of knots" - the ritual cleansing of all mortal transgressions which

would be a stain upon the sacred Order and a weakness in its fabric - was very much so.

After this came the slow process of re-establishing the matriarchal order. This belonged largely to the White Amazons, assisted by the army in the physical task of reconstruction, and occasionally in curbing any of the menfolk who were too teracious in their memory of patriarchal ideas. They did this as little as possible, for it was their aim to put all discipline in the hands of the homesteads and their mistresses and of the local community as a whole as quickly as possible. Their aim was not to build an empire, but simply to re-establish the Law and then to pass on, leaving the nations behind them free and independant. Thus it was a task for the teacher and the preacher rather than the soldier.

Often there were other tasks also. In many areas banditry had become rife in the time without the Law, and roads outside the major cities were used only by fools and by great caravans of traders protected by armed guards; and even these latter were often attacked. In such cases it was the custom of the Amazons to issue an edict on the first new moon after their establishment in a city, declaring that all bandits who came to them before the next new moon would be granted a free pardon, honourable livelihood and dwelling; after that "upon thy haunts and thy hiding-places; upon thy

ways of passage and upon thy fastnesses shall the right hand of the Law descend, and the servant thereof, like, in her wrath, to the very thunder of the heavens." These edicts nearly always went out in the name of Alana Fi'Alana; for that name was known and feared throughout the continent - Red Alana "the Hammer of the Lawless". Many of the bandits were but fugitives from patriarchy and not only gave themselves up freely enough, but quickly joined the Amazons and became the core of the native Civil Guards which the Amazons were setting up, or even joined the Crusade itself.

Many of those who did not give themselves up also ended by becoming good Amazons; even patriarchal bandits often finished by swelling the ranks of the Men's Auxiliary Units. In large measure, this was due to the extraordinary personality of Red Alana. She was a strikingly handsome maid in the fourth decade of her age, despite the fact that a long vertical scar ran down the left side of her forehead and her left cheek, having missed destroying her eye by the merest whisker (the line of her eyelash still did not quite run true). The vivid red hair which had given her her name (vivid even for the western Amazons, among whom red hair was not uncommon) had, for some reason, turned prematurely white. Not from worry, certainly, for she was still as wild and devil-may-care as she had been

at twenty.

Her methods were unusual to say the least. It was rumoured that she tried and passed sentence upon her prisoners from horseback, and executed the sentence there and then. The High Command turned a blind eye to her eccentricities not so much because she was highly efficient in a military sense (although she was), but because of her ability to communicate with the bandits; to win over those whom the Amazons would otherwise have had to fight to the death.

Many of the bandits who did not give themselves up in the first place were not very admirable characters. The worst of them would raid remote outlying homesteads and torture the inhabitants into revealing the whereabouts of their treasure - not so much life-savings as the savings of five or ten generations. When a person first inflicts torture upon another person, he (for it is nearly always a man) feels a certain reluctance, a certain drawing-back, but slowly he becomes inured to it, and finally learns to enjoy it. He becomes a true, hardened sadist. What hope is there then for his soul, emptied of all human decency? The only hope is death, which breaks what would otherwise be a vicious cycle endlessly dragging him deeper and deeper into the blackest abysses of depravity. This is one of the merciful functions of death; one of the reasons why

god, in her infinite wisdom, allowed death into the universe. Born again as a child, cut off from the past and oblivious to it, the torturer is given a fresh start, his downward plunge arrested; although nothing will be able to stop the chain of action and reaction which will bring suffering to him in the proportion ~~to the suffering to him in proportion~~ to the suffering he has inflicted.

For such torturers, the sword of Red Alona hastened the merciful release of death, and cut short the catalogue of crimes for which they would have to suffer. She had, as it were, a nose for those who were the really depraved ~~and~~ souls, and often, with these despatched, a spell was broken over the others. The old reactions of human decency came quickly back to them. The manner of their leader's death often provided the psychological shock which they required. Having passed sentence of death, Alona would, without warning, spur her horse forward, draw her sword and strike off his head. Or, giving some rogue a Silver Star's start (i.e. letting him run for the time it took to say the Silver Star prayer), she would gallop after him and return in a minute or so bearing his head. If she was unjust at all, she erred on the side of lenity, but the dramatic manner in which she carried out her sentences, together with the ferocity and suddenness with which her hand-picked raiders battled and subdued the gangs,

convinced them that they were confronted with someone a hundred times wicker and fiercer than their own dreaded leaders. Suddenly the bully who had held them in awe lay dead and, swinging his head by the hair, this remarkable washtubler, this lightning bolt of the right hand of the Law, was now giving the orders.

They had thought the Amazons were 'soft', despite their conquests. They had thought the Law was starchy and colourless compared to their wild, lawless life. They did not think so ~~now~~ now.

Yet for all this, the success of the "Red Raiders" depended equally upon another personality, very different from that of Red Alana. For every thousand people that had heard the name of Red Alana, perhaps one or two had heard that of Mother Grayne, yet, in her way, she was a person no less remarkable. Her hair was as white as Alana's own, for she was between twice and ~~for~~ thrice her age (maids lived longer in that age), and over the white robe of her Order she was wont to wear a long brown old army cloak. In her youth she had been an archer, fighting in battles long before the Great Crusade had been thought of, or would even have been thought possible. When the little Amazon settlements - mostly remote religious communities in self-imposed exile from the decadence of the late-matriarchal cities, suddenly swelled by a stream of refugees as those cities fell to

the patriarchal hordes - were attacked by the patriarchs, she had fought with one of the brave little makeshift armies that defended their mountain fastnesses. "The League for the Defence of New Marisia", it had been called; later it was simply The Chivalric League, and later still the Fifth Legion, still nicknamed "the Leaguers"; but nowadays, one only had to mention "the League" anywhere in the middle-world, and everybody would know what was meant. She never rose above the ranks, and sometimes joked in later years about having been an archer in a Legion whose fame rested almost wholly upon its cavalry.

She was a deeply contemplative person, as archers often are; archery being one of the most contemplative of the martial arts. It was not unusual for an archer to become a full contemplative in her later years. Tgrayne did so much earlier than usual. The little armies and better, the spiritual training methods of the contemplative Orders refined the martial arts to perfection, and the would-be believers eventually decided that they were biting off more than they could chew. As soon as a lasting peace was established, Tgrayne retired from the League, and wandered deep into the mountains as a stare - a solitary contemplative. Little is known of her life during this period, but at the age when many archers are beginning to think of retiring into contemplation, she returned, having, as she put it, "licked the

rim of the cup of Enlightenment". She settled in a cave not far from New Marisia, teaching a small group of devoted aspirants until, as she grew older, she was persuaded to come into one of the contemplative orders for the sake of her health; so, she put on the white robe and continued her teaching from a pleasant little room looking out over a cloister with a neat green quadrangle and a fountain at the centre. And there she was expected to end her days. But she did not.

When the Great Crusade began, her Order sent a great many sisters into the White Amazons; but imagine the consternation when old Mother Igrayne declared her intention of going with them! They tried every manner of persuasion, but nobody quite dared to stand in the way of so saintly a person "God has called me," she declared, "and she knows what is best." The trouble was that she had never actually joined the Order; officially she had always been a guest of the House Hense, so she had no superior who could actually bind her in obedience not to go. "My chickens are going," she declared, referring to her pupils, "and I am going with them. They need someone to look after them."

It was perhaps a good thing that nobody at the convent at New Marisia knew for a long time that, having made sure that her "chickens" were alright, Mother

Igrayne somehow managed to attach herself to the notorious Red Raiders.

Red Alena was not wont to be rude; certainly not to the old, and least of all to those in sacred Orders; but she did have three demons of a temper as the phrase went, especially before she met Mother Igrayne; and Providence had arranged that she should be in a particularly fiery humour the morning those two first encountered.

"I desire no White Amazons to ride with me," exploded that tempestuous person; "and I did I'd not choose thee, for that thou art old and breathless and no fit rider; now carry off thy carcass for I have much that calls me."

"I am an Amazon," replied the old ascetic with dignity, "therefore I may not raise a sword against yours. But if you will put up your fists..." Alena stepped forward incredulously, thinking she must have misheard her visitor's words. Long contemplation does not dim an archer's eye, but contrariwise, makes it all the sharper; and as a wizened, bony fist flew straight and true as a flighted shaft, unerringly found its target and, as Alena herself later put it, "knocked me clean off my pins and left me wondering if the moon had fallen on my head." Thus began one of the most important friendships in the history of the Great Crusade.

"There be a lesson in the art of courtesy."

said Mother Igrayne. "an then had been my pupil & should have taught it with a willow-rod."

"Mother," said Alana Fi'Alana, picking herself up from the ground only to prostrate herself again, "an thee will have me, & am thy pupil from this day forth."

To the fire of Alana's native temperament Igrayne added the fire of the love of God; from an adventurer in the name of the Law, she turned her into a servant of the Law who was also an adventurer. Long hours she spent in unfolding to that passionate and unreflective mind the beauty and majesty of the Divine Order, and at times she despaired of reaching her inner depths. One day Alana came to her and knelt at her feet, as was the custom between kanga and pupil. "Mother," she said, "I have seen so much suffering in my days; so much cruelty and wickedness, that my heart is heavy with it."

"Thou hast done more than thy part in setting it aright, my daughter," replied her mistress.

"Yet, mother, there is so much, so very much," she sighed.

"It is said that all the raindrops that fall upon the earth are the tears of Our Lady, weeping for Her children," said Igrayne, and thereupon fell for a few minutes into contemplation. When again she became conscious of the world, Alana was still kneeling before her, with her head

bowed, but she noticed that her shoulders were trembling. "Look at me, child," she said. Alana obeyed, and she saw that tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Grayne took her in her arms. "My little child," she said, "I believe that we have found the heart."

For the rest of that day and most of the night Grayne talked to her of the meaning of suffering and the bitter sacrifice of our Lady and of the sacred Law that She has brought to rescue us from suffering. And from that day forward, Red Alana was a changed person. No less a fighter and a firebrand, perhaps more so; but one that had found her soul.

"Many are the ways of God," said Mother Grayne "as many as the souls that travel them; and some of them be passing strange." And strange it was that Red Alana, that was always so joyful, should come to God by the way of sorrow. She ~~had a deeper~~ deeper had a deeper joy now, and the secret suffering, though not yet passed from her, was calmed within her breast. It was perhaps because she understood less of the Truth than most Amazons that Red Alana had been so good at working with the bandits. Yet now that she had found the Truth, she was even better.

Grayne and Alana worked in double harness. Slowly Grayne regrouped most of her old "chickens" around her, forming them

into "White Raiders", who moved among the bandit gangs as Alana's Red Raiders were finishing the first part of their job. Shocked by the whirlwind attack of the Raiders; shocked by the sudden execution of the "rotten apples", who had seemed like unassailable demon-kings mere hours ago, almost equally shocked by the lack of brutality which the Raiders showed once the ~~upper~~ unpleasant part of the job was over, and completely disoriented and uncertain about what the rest of their lives might be (if, indeed, they were to have any), they ~~found~~ found themselves gathered around a blazing camp-fire by this old woman. They were given warming food by her pupils, who treated them with the most exquisite grace and courtesy; and she began to talk to them. She spoke gently, and she was gentle, yet somehow they sensed that, in her own way she was as tough as, if not tougher than, Red Alana herself.

She spoke to them of death and the meaning of life. Themes which perhaps they would have laughed to scorn this time yesterday, but which today seemed terribly real and urgent. Shaken and afraid, they could begin to understand how their victims had felt, they could, perhaps begin to feel remorse; if not remorse, they could at any rate feel the urgency of Grayne's question: "It may be you will die this night or

on the morrow; will the deeds of your life grant you safe passage in the world to come, or will they rise up to accuse you?" She held them fascinated, for her voice resounded with the force of Truth, and her person radiated the intangible but unmistakable aura of one who had "licked the rim of the cup of Enlightenment". "These lawless ones are all wound so tight as fiddlestrings. Deep within they do desire to hear the Truth, though their outer parts be so stubborn that they must be pruned, pinned by the ears before they are constrained to listen. Deep within they hate the evil they have done; they want to yield themselves up and to be forgiven. Our Lady wants only to forgive them." And it seemed that she was right. By the end of the evening many of the lawless were in tears about her. The scorn of their 'harder' comrades no longer mattered. This saintly and wonderful person believed the Truth, and so did Red Alana; so did the graceful sisters they saw about them; so also the steel-hand Raiders who had thrashed both them and their comrades in combat. Their old world had died that day, and this night a new world was born.

So the Amazons made their slow but certain way through the middle-world, carefully ordering and purifying each territory before they moved on to the next. But not all territories presented such

problems. Not all were infested with bandits;
not all even required conquest. One of ~~them~~ these
was the little town of Sain-Arrien and
its outlying villages.

The Amazons in Sain Arien:

Part 2.

The first thing the Amazons brought to Sain Arien was music, and music was, in all probability, the most lasting thing that they brought: music and tales. A hundred years after they had gone, their songs were still sung in the ale-house and around the fire on winter's evenings; their tunes were still played on the pipe-and-tabor for the dancers in the village square and picked out with a goose-quill on the three stringed dulcimer. Their tales - variants from the western world upon the old eternal themes - were added to the stock of the village story-tellers and became part of the rich green mental undergrowth of generations of ~~old~~ children. These things apart, the Amazons brought little of lasting importance to Sain Arien; life carried on before their coming and after their going ^{much} as it had for countless generations.

For Sain Arien was a quiet, out-of-the-way sort of place, distant from any large centres of population and of no political importance. The various patriarchal revolutions had scarcely touched it. In point of fact, Sain Arien did officially have a patriarchal government when the Amazons arrived. The third of the patriarchal revolutions which shook the Annapolita

region, on whose outskirts lay Sain Arien, established the Eternal Empire of the Earth-Father, one of the more stable of the juntas, which, having a longer period of unchallenged rule than most, found time to turn its attention to less pressing matters. Thus it was that Sain Arien received an embassy from the emissaries of Adenay II, the Living God (may he live forever!) demanding the fealty, fealty of Sain Arien under threat of fire and sword. Their demand to speak with the town's governor caused some confusion, since no such office existed, but it was finally decided that they should meet the Lady Marya Fildrian, who was the head of the oldest and most noble family in Sain Arien. She was a just and wise if somewhat idiosyncratic old matriarch, come of a long line of just and wise and (more often than not) somewhat idiosyncratic matriarchs both old and young. Despite the fact that she held no official position outside her own family, and the town was theoretically governed by a council of elders, it was unthinkable that the affairs of the town should ever proceed other than according to her stated wishes.

The emissaries, however would not accept a female governor, so the new post of governor was hurriedly created and given to Master Gilrois Fildetta Fildrian, the Lady Marya's husband. So was

established the custom, still in force when the Amazons arrived, that the Governor of Sain Arien should be the husband of the head of the Arianya.

The Eternal Empire levied a heavy tribute upon Sain Arien, which was collected by a small military detachment every year at harvest-time; and after the various officers involved had taken extra to line their own purses, the blow was crippling. Fortunately, the Empire soon became fully occupied with raids on its more accessible borders, and Sain Arien was forgotten. Within a few short years the Eternal Empire was forgotten also, and Adony II the Living God had been crucified by King Ludn, the Lord of the Heavens. Sain Arien, however, knew nothing about this, and still believed itself to be a part of the Eternal Empire, glad only that that awesome body had decided it could survive without the tribute of Sain Arien. It was many years and several revolutions before a new embassy arrived to demand the allegiance of and tribute of the Governor Colbert; and once again, the intolerable burden was born only for a short time. The same pattern repeated itself three more times, and when the Amazons arrived, the people of Sain Arien believed themselves to be the subjects of Adolphus IV, Universal Monarch of the World. The Amazons found it a delightful joke that Sain Arien was three revolutions behind the times.

By the time of the Governor Kyran, three

revolutions after Adab Adolphus IV, the incursions had become a bitter memory, and life in Sain Aien had long returned to its accustomed way of life. They had heard nothing of the Great Crusade, and the arrival of one dull spring afternoon of a serious young Amazon officer in her ceremonial armour, a vision of silver and gold, seated bolt upright in her ceremonial chariot and surrounded by a guard of six cavalry officers, like the sun enthroned among her six planets (which, indeed, was the symbolic meaning of the party), created among them a sensation of gloom and leaden apprehension. They knew nothing of the six Legions whose colours the horsemaids bore, nor even of the illustrious Princess Mariamne, the leader of the Crusade, whose royal banner floated above the splendid war-chariot. Nevertheless, the Governor was quickly aware of a great difference between the embassy of the daiko Rhier Torysien and any previous emissaries. Until today, all such visitations had had but one purpose: extortion, more or less thinly disguised in official jargon. But of all the strange proclamations Sain Aien had ever received, this was most certainly the strongest. The long address read out by the Daiko's herald asked, in brief, whether the Governor and people of Sain Aien would willingly renounce all heresies and misbelief and return to the Ekklesia of the one true God in obedience to Her law, or whether they

would meet with the armies of Her servant and regent, the worshipful Princess Mariamne, namely the Holy Confederation of the Six Legions, upon the field of war.

Not even the smallest of the patriarchates had ever suggested going to war with Sain Arien, and the idea of her taking up arms against the massed forces of the Amazon legions was positively bizarre; yet Amazonian courtesy demanded that this little town should be accorded no less dignity than the mightiest nation-at-arms. After supervising the proclamation in the town square, the Daïke was taken to Mansarian, the ancestral home of the Arianya, and therefore also the Governor's residence, for a private audience with the Governor.

At the entrance of the great house she was met by the chaplain and the seneschal. She was surprised to see that the chaplain was robed in a manner indistinguishable from that of an orthodox priestess - which, indeed, was precisely what she was. The Daïke drew her sword, and, holding it by the blade, presented the hilt to the seneschal in token of peace. If the seneschal was taken aback by this small ritual (and surely she must have been) she showed nothing. The post of seneschal was an hereditary one, held always by the eldest daughter of a certain prominent Sain Arien family, and they prided themselves upon being equal to

every situation. The last time an Arian senechal had shown a flicker of surprise was when the late Mistress Kara insisted upon galloping cross-country and jumping the two hedges at the sides of the Gated Path mounted backwards on her horse.

The Governor was a youngish man of a type commonly found among the kindred (rural gentry) of the matriarchal countryside. Long before any patriarchal occupation, and in areas where it had not taken place, the old matriarchal cities had succumbed, if not always to decadence, at any rate to a slickness and over-~~so~~ sophistication which was one step removed from it. Those of the Raihira, or noble, estate who had not accepted this ethos were consciously in reaction against it. They no longer possessed the simple natural nobility - the nobility of innocence - which was to be found in Sain Arien. Young men like Kynan Fi Arien could be met throughout the middle-world in ~~anything other than~~ in relatively undisturbed backwaters such as Sain Arien, though Daikhe Rhien Terysien had not hitherto enjoyed that pleasure. Indeed, this was the first time that the Daikhe had encountered the culture of the middle-world in anything other than its most degenerate form. Governor Kynan exhaled the atmosphere of his native culture, and even as he was beginning to realize that the Daikhe was very different from the barbarians with

whom his father had had to deal, so she was beginning to sense the atmosphere of a civilisation not decadent, yet less arid and mellow than the austere and brilliant Amazon world. A culture older not only than the new world of the Amazons, forged from the deep piety of the exile-convents and the high courage of the warriors, but older also than the world of the Western Empire and the sunken continent that had gone before it. Her mind travelled quickly back over the past few months, and suddenly a thought struck her which was the answer to a vague but insistent puzzle which had been troubling her mind. As the Crusade struck ever ~~deeper~~ ^{deeper} into the heartland of the middle-world she had become increasingly conscious of a distinct difference in character between the decadent cities which they were coming upon and those which they had met at the beginning of the Crusade; a different kind of decadence, she had thought. Now, suddenly, the explanation came to her. As they moved eastward they were coming more and more into territories which, while still a part of the Western Empire, had been far less under its influence. Parts of their culture had been brought from the south during the great migrations from the Southern Empire, had thousands of years ago; a culture too high and fine to continue in the coarser air of these later times. The gentle hand of the

Western Empire had shoved it up, and a hybrid of the two cultures had been formed. The whole of the middle world had been shaken by the collapse of the Empire, and decadence had set in here as elsewhere. It was not so much a different kind of decadence as a different thing in decay. The decadent cities of the west and those which the Crusade had recently taken were as similar and as different as a rotten apple and a rotten plum.

She had not sufficient evidence to make a report to the High Command but intuitively the Daiké was already sure: Sain Arien was sound. But it was not the soundness of the great western matriarchates which had begun to decline two centuries ago. It was the soundness of a good sturdy mongrel culture alloyed with of the western culture and of another culture, older, deeper and far more beautiful. Outwardly impassive, the Daiké breathed inwardly a sigh. What had the poet said? "Many of the fine, fair things are passed away, and shall not be again; and our world shall not know the glory of our mothers, neither shall our daughters know our glory." Yes, the world was a long and weary downward path; and even if the Great Crusade would turn back the clock for a century or two, yet the patriarchal barbarians would inherit the earth in the end. Thus was it written and thus

that should it be. The Pax Amazonia of the coming centuries would not be so fine a thing as the Western Empire had been at its best; and as for the beauties of the old middle-world, and the still more distant beauties of the South, what remained of them now? "The grass doth grow upon the dust that was their body." And some time in the distant future, when the barbarians had destroyed this world entirely, a new Golden Age would come, and so the cycle should begin again. How truly had her old Kanya spoken: "This world is but a turning wheel from which ~~they~~ ^{they and} ~~could~~ must leap if she will be free."

The Daiko wrenched her mind from these meditations and concentrated her mind upon her host. Gentle of manner and slightly shy, he moved with practised grace and lightness. If he was agitated, his strict Kaihira upbringing permitted him to show nothing beyond his serene and courteous exterior. The Daiko felt herself drawn to him. "We are as similar," she thought, "as a firm apple and a firm plum. And as different."

The Governor was pressing a drink upon her. "It is very poor, most excellent mistress, very poor most truly, but it is the best we can do now. Our harvests have been more bad than we can say." Such self-deprecation was common Kaihira courtesy, but sipping her skorshien, the

Daiko found that poor was, if anything, too generous a term for it. It was difficult to believe that a Raichiran had nothing better, or that he would give such bilge-water to his guests. Was this a calculated insult? No, she felt not. She cast her eyes around the room and found it generally well appointed, and yet showing certain conspicuous signs of dilapidation. Most notably a window was broken, and the glass covering a portrait of the first Lady Marya as the lily-mum-mistress (one of the five traditional portrait forms) was cracked from side to side. The Daiko's natural sensitivity had been honed to perfection by long training in the art of the sword, for a perfect swordswoman can see her opponent's stroke before she has made it. In this case she could tell as easily as if she had been present that the damage in this room had been done within this hour. She could sense the violence - and also the unwillingness - with which it had been performed. Something was amiss in this house. Something passing strange.

"It is a fine and noble brew, my reverend master," she said with some effort. "I pray you, refill my cup."

"You do my mistress's house more honour than it can ever deserve." Even though his serene exterior, the Governor showed a little discomfort, acutely conscious that, in the matter of shokkien at any rate,

his words were more than a mere ritual of courtesy.

"I have travelled from the western edge of the world, my master, and I have not seen a finer house nor one more fair to look upon."

"My lady is most gracious, but this house has ever been a humble dwelling; a little lodge in the mountains, lost to the grandeur of the world. Yet even so it has known better days; better days and richer, ma'am. The soil of these lands is quite exhausted, and our people know barely how to eke a sustenance. Ma'am, if every soul in Seim Arian were a wandering strave, we could be scarce the poorer and that is the hard truth of it." He bowed his head ^{and placed} two fingers upon his brow in ^{the traditional gesture of} sorrow.

"Good Master, you ~~at~~ spoke of your mistress's house. ~~Are~~ Are you not Governor here?"

The Governor was quite unable to see any inconsistency in this, and replied in some puzzlement, with disarming innocence

"Yes, ma'am, most surely I am Governor herer. I spoke of my wife."

~~The Daiké was quite unable to see any inconsistency in this, and~~

The Daiké could not restrain the shimmer of a smile from passing her lips. "Well, good Master Governor, you have studied the proclamation of my most royal mistress. What is your reply?"

The Governor's reply was obviously a time-honoured one, learned by rote by every Governor of Sain Arien. "Most revered mistress, the Governor and people are happy beyond expression to accept the yoke and suzerainty of your most noble and puissant empire; and with all our hearts we will to serve your royal mistress with all the means at our command. Truly we shall keep the day of your coming as a day of feast and rejoicing so long as Sain Arien shall endure."

"My sovereign master," replied the Daiko "with the profoundest and ^{most} humble respect, I venture to suggest that you have not yet fully comprehended the nature of my mistress's proclamation. I am the emissary of no empire, nor does my lady seek sovereignty over Sain Arien."

"Good my mistress, I understand you not," replied the Governor somewhat nervously.

"Will the Governor and people of Sain Arien undertake willingly to return to the single Law of God and the Way of Themis?" asked the Daiko. Surely Sain Arien was sound enough for these words to be understood. In truth, it was too sound.

"Return? ... Good my mistress, I understand you not."

"Will the Governor and people of Sain Arien willingly renounce all heresies..."

"Heresies!" interjected Kyran. Now she had really frightened him. "Please, ma'am, would it cause great offence if I ask that my

wife be present, that you may speak with her in this matter?"

"No offence in the world, my good master," replied the Daike. "I wish only to abide by the custom of this place."

The seneschal was summoned, left the room again, and in a remarkably short space of time returned to hold open the door for the fifth Lady Marga, tall, dark, remarkably young looking and with a force of personality that filled the room like a lightning-storm. The Daike sensed that for the past half-hour she had been pacing a nearly room in an agony of frustration that so important an affair should be taking place in her house, and she unable to see that it was conducted aright. Had she been eavesdropping? Most certainly not; but there was little that missed the ears of that seneschal and her staff, and nothing that was not reported to ~~her~~ mistress - the mistress. Certainly, from the scant attention she paid, she had little need of her husband's explanations. Outwardly she appeared serene, but her inner turmoil was betrayed by the fact that she entered with a glass of shokkien in her hands - a minor breach of etiquette which would rarely occur in such a household.

"Dona," said the Governor, reverencing her with a deep little bow, "The most noble Daike wishes to know about heresy in

Sain Arien."

"Heresy!" exploded The Lady Marya, returning the Daike's reverence courteously. "If there were heresy in Sain Arien I should I should know about it. Aye, and an I know about it there should not long be heresy in Sain Arien, that I warrant thee. ~~Heresy~~ Heresy, on my mother's pyre! Heresy, by the legions of the damned! I'll tell thee. There have been heretics in Sain Arien. Aye, and thieves too. But not a one of them came from Sain Arien."

"My lady," said Kyran, calm, but deathly pale, "use caution, use reason, they have the power..."

"Aye, aye, they have the power." She turned again to the Daike, beginning more calmly, but quickly losing her temper again. "You can make Sain Arien a part of your empire. We are very willing. You can take your tributes and bleed our people white. But if you come into my house and talk of heresy in Sain Arien, by the holy Name, I'll take a dog-whip..."

"My lady..." Kyran raised his voice for the first time in many years, but the Lady Marya could not be stopped.

"You are the heretics, you with your ugly male godlings and your idols and abominations. Come to this window. See you that Temple? Never was there any idol in that Temple, and never will there be. We shall burn it down first. You talk of making war on Sain Arien. Truly, if you desire to

there will
be a war.
You will
win it, of
course, but

lay hands on our Temple, you'll have to
kill every last one of us before you touch
our Lady's house." Flushed and angry, she
walked to the chair where Kynan was
weeping, and, standing behind it, placed
both her hands upon his breast, glaring
furiously at the Daik, as if to say "Look
what you have done to my my husband."

"My lady, my lady," sobbed Kynan, "you
know not what it is that you have
done."

The Lady Marya stroked his hair for
a short time. Her anger subsided and
a deep sadness came over her. "My
swallow, my stallion, my lovely hunting-dog;
I know full well what I have done.
I spoke in anger, but I spoke not rashly.
If the time has come, then the time has
come. We know that it must come some
day. Praise be to our Lady that we
were spared so long. We will not live
a life of ignominy and treason, my dear
one. That were to live too long." She looked
up again at the Daik. "You shall see,
my good soldier, you shall see. Saint Arian
knows how to dies die."

For a moment the Daik gazed upon
Lady Marya. She was not a beautiful
maid, though she was not unattractive,
but the fire in her heart lit up her
whole being with a loveliness surpassing
any merely physical beauty. And seeing
such courage and such nobility, the eyes
of the Daik Rhien Terysien welled up with

tears. "My lady," she said, "thy word is so
cruel, that thou hast melted the heart
of a hard soldier. No Amazon shall ever
lay hands on thy Temple. My lady, I would tell
thee that I love our Lady as greatly as
thine own self, if that were not to
praise myself too highly. If any infidel
shall seek to lay hands upon the Temple
of Saint Arien, there shall be three centuries
of Amazons, horse, foot and chariot to
defend it. You have the word of the Duke
Khien Teyzen. I shall kneel before the altar
in the Temple of Saint Arien and make
an offering to our Lady in thanks that
there are such noble hearts in the world
as thine."

"You are believers?" faltered the Lady Marya.

"Believers, ay, and that is all the
purpose of our coming. To turn the
middle-world unto the Law again, to
cast out the infidels and their idols and
abominations. We do not want you to be
a part of any empire. We do not want
to rob you or take tributes..."

"You are not levying a tribute?"

"Most surely not, did I not say..."

"And we have made you drink this
belligerent!" exploded the Lady Marya seizing
the glass from the hand of the astonished
Duke. She pressed her own glass into her
hand. "Here, drink this, 'twill settle your
stomach." Obediently, the Duke took a sip.

"Why, 'tis the finest skokkion I have
tasted this long year," she exclaimed, and

no part of this statement was motivated by courtesy - indeed the note of surprise in her voice was scarcely in keeping with the demands of etiquette. She began to laugh.

"Seneschal! Seneschal!" cried the Lady Marya. "fetch someone to mend that window; we are like enough to die of cold in here." She turned again to the Daike. "I fear we have no food fit to be eaten in the house, mistress. Everything has been taken away in case you made an inspection. We deemed it fit that we should appear to be in poverty, my mistress, that the tribute should be small. My people have suffered dreadfully in the past..."

The Daike was still laughing. "Reason me no more, good my lady, I have some little wit, for all I be a soldier."

"There is the sub-cellar, my lady," suggested Kydon with a twinkle.

"The sub-cellar; of course!" exclaimed Marya. "We have a cellar below the cellar which nobody could ever find. Do Amazons drink all?"

By this latter question, the Lady Marya had unwittingly showed how very far Sain Arien lay from the rest of the world. The embassy did not return home that night. But on the morrow it carried tidings of a fully successful mission.

The Amazons in Sain Arien Part 3.

The long green victory-dragon snaked down the main street of Sain Arien in front of the procession with bells jingling and ribbons streaming, the thirteen Amazons within its silken body wheeling and curving with a deftness born of long practice. It came to rest before the raised platform which had been erected in the town square. The troops arrayed themselves in their order with banners to the fore. As well as those of the two legions represented among the contingent, there were several emblems of the regions and craft-guilds to which sections of the soldiery belonged. When all were in place, a wide aisle was left between the ranks of soldiers and townspeople, leading to the platform steps. Down this aisle passed first the bearer of the royal standard, followed by a Nikraya of the Triumulate responsible for all military and secular affairs in the Amt Annaywita region. She was flanked by two Daikes, one from each legion - one of these the people recognised as the one who had called upon the Governor a few weeks ago. Accompanying this party were two white-robed Inozui bearing ceremonial staves, and with silver circlets over their white head-veils. Behind them came a small retinue of standard bearers and others. The lively music of the triumphal entry had given place to a solemn and dignified

processional march.

Upon the platform were the Governor's party; himself, the Lady Marya, the household chaplain, the senior priestess of the town with her ancilla, the lady of the Temple with her senior Temple-maiden, representatives from each of the villages and magdoranjas from each of the crafts.

The ~~Nikrara~~ Nikraya and her party mounted the platform. She bowed deeply to the Governor, for he was Governor still, although within the hour he would be so in token of peace and the bond of friendship. He then embraced

they embraced each of the Daikes in turn, and a particular warmth was in the embrace with Rhien Terysien, for already a deep friendship had taken root between her and Kynan and the Lady Marya.

During the ceremony that followed, the Governor's personal standard was removed, and that of the Lady Marya put in its place. The preparation for this had involved some difficulty - difficulty, since Kynan had never possessed a personal standard. Finding one for the Lady Marya had involved some little thought, but it was quickly decided that the standard of Sain Arien itself could be used, since the name of the Arian family was the same as that of the town. Indeed, enquiry among the more historically-minded of the townsfolk revealed that the standard had been used by the Arionya at one period. A personal standard for the Governor, however, presented more difficulty. His mother's

family had never born a standard so far as anyone could recall. The obvious procedure would be for him to adopt his wife's, but this, apparently, would not be in keeping with the nature of the ceremony. As Rhien Terysiem put it: "Sain Arien has to become a little more patriarchal before we can make it Matriarchal again."

"Well, it do seem passing strange to me, for a surety," declared the Lady Marya. The senior priestess, Madria Korunna, however, having a firm grasp of the nature and importance of ritual, found no difficulty in understanding the matter. "I will do more of good for Sain Arien than you may think, most honoured daughter," she explained. "Master Kyran is a good man, and never was Governor save in name alone, yet well thou dost know that there is no thing transpires upon this heavy world of clay that echoes not within the world invisible, nor canst thou name a ~~na~~ name on any thing or person that bindeth not a web of working. Let Sain Arien be brought within the full measure of the Law by this most puissant working of the western race, and that which was amiss shall be set aright."

"By your leave, most reverend mother," replied the Lady Marya, ever ~~quick~~ quick to defend her ~~beloved~~ beloved people, "there is but little amiss in Sain Arien."

"But little indeed," said the priestess with a smile - for were they not her children also? "Yet if a score of chanters chant

together and but one have a false ear, is not the sweetness of the music turned, like to milk that hath stood an hour too long before drinking?"

"You will say ere long that there is heresy in Saint Arian!" ~~ex~~ exclaimed the Lady Marya, who was by this time able to make light of her former outburst. The company laughed.

"Not heresy, daughter, but there is a little forgetfulness; we have been too long severed from the learned world and the teachers of high doctrine."

"My mother," said the Lady Marya, with earnestness "how can we have been severed from the world of learning whiles you have been with us?"

Madria Kerunna smiled. Her children regarded her as a very oracle of ~~wisdom~~ wisdom, and the priestesses of the ~~or~~ village came to her as a great kanya; yet she was conscious that she was herself but little more than a simple country priestess, having spent but a single year in the little seminary of Annamatti in the distant days of her youth, just before it was closed by Adonay. With deep shame, she acknowledged a part of herself which dreaded the coming of real learned ~~teachers~~ teachers for the west, for she feared that the respect of her children would diminish greatly once they were able to make the comparison. "Yet I need not fear to lose their love" she consoled herself "and that is all a good

priestess should desire. I should not wish to be thought what I am not." Yet her fears were largely unfounded, for long years of contemplation and of painstaking work in helping her pupils in matters great and small had built steadily upon the firm foundation laid by the seminary, and she had grown far wiser than she knew. At last she said: "I shall welcome the coming of the learned innocents to our town and to our villages, for they shall work great good among us."

Turning her attention to the matter in hand, the priestess fell for a few minutes into contemplation, and then, returning to herself, she declared that since the name he had inherited from his mother was Fialdane, the silver crescent of the Arianya should, on Kyran's standard, be supported by the bear of Djan. It was also necessary that a wand of office should be made for him, in order that it might pass into the hands of the Lady Marya.

The passing of the wand was the high point of the ceremony. Kneeling, the ~~former~~ Governor presented it to Madria Keranna, and was no longer the Governor. Kneeling, the Lady Marya received it from the priestess, and with it the authority over Sain Arien passed to her. She was not, however, titled Governor, for that, as the Amazons said, was an abominable patriarchal name. As she rose to address her people, holding aloft the wand, she was the first Vicar of Sain Arien.

Vicar was an old imperial title, which had been common in the middle-world up until

a hundred years ago, although it had not reached as far east as Annayzilita. The Vicar of a town or region was so called because she was the vicar or representative of the local Princess (The Western empire beyond the shores of the drowned Continent being made up of a large number of tiny ~~states~~ nations or city-states), just as the Princess was the vicar of the Empress and the empress the vicar of God. It was perhaps a little ~~incongruous~~ incongruous, therefore, that the various independent territories now being established by the Amazons in the middle-world were each governed by a Vicar, though in later years, as the Pase Amazonia found itself compelled to take on the mantle of Empire, they became Vicars in the old, literal sense.

The Vicar of Sain Arien was by no means unaccustomed to the making of speeches. She began by speaking of the great benefits which would accrue from the working of this ritual. Many of the villagers interpreted this as a promise of good harvests; and indeed that summer the long run of poor harvests in the area was broken by a magnificent crop. She talked of her friendship with the Amazons, and of the Daike Rhien Terysien's promise to defend the Temple of Sain Arien. "These are our sisters," she declared. "Our sisters, our friends and our most welcome guests. Let us show that Sain Arien knows how to greet them out of the bosom of our hearts." There was an enthusiastic response from part of the crowd, but an awkward silence from others. The Lady Marya

laughed. "Aye, and Littlewell and Underwood, and Bridgewode Bridgewater..." As the names of the villages rolled off her tongue, wave upon wave of cheers exploded from different sections of the crowd, until all was drowned in a chaos of applause and laughter. Kyran smiled at Daike Khien, who was obviously ^{enjoying the spectacle}. He knew that Lady Marga knew her audience well, and had brought off this little joke largely in order to amuse her. In truth, it pleased the Daike rather more deeply than either of them could suspect. After months of dealings with crushed and dispirited peoples confused and demoralised by the effects of chaos, ~~tyranny~~ tyranny and war, or at the best, with people utterly spoiled by the slick, cynical sophistication of the urban matriarchal decadence, how glorious it was to witness the healthy, innocent exuberance of normal, God-loving people. "Sain Aien is unnd." she thought, repeating her first assessment of the town. "This is what we are fighting for."

The Lady Marga turned to more serious matters, and told the people of the Great Crusade, the liberation of Annapolita and of the middle-world. "The age of lawlessness doth draw to a close in the middle-world, my dear ones, and on the day of the tyrant-wolf doth the sun go down. Henceforth shall the world tread the measure of the Law, according to the music of Eternity, even as it was in the good days of our mothers. And even among us ~~for~~ here a new day doth dawn; a new day, my dear ones, and a brighter. Our Lady

hath preserved us through the darkness of the night, my gentle people, for She is very merciful. There is one God, one God alone, none other God than She."

"One God alone, none other God than She." echoed the people in the time-honoured response.

"This day, my good people, this day are we returned unto the full measure of Her Law. Let us turn again unto our Lady. Let us dedicate ourselves to Her anew. Where there were faults and forgetfulness in the lawless time, my dear ones, let them be forgotten. She has forgiven them, for She is very ~~merciful~~ merciful. Let us turn again, my dear ones, let us turn again to Her."

From the ground, a group of innocui began a chant of the holy Name, and the people enthusiastically joined in, for they were a devout and warm-hearted people. The Amazon musicians accentuated the rhythm with their drums and bells. The very quality of the chanting told the more experienced of the White Amazons that here was a rich and fruitful soil for the nurture of souls. The chant began slowly and sweetly, becoming faster and louder until it reached an exhilarating climax, and then tapered slowly and sweetly away into silence.

When the silence had lasted for a minute or two, the Lady Marya made her first announcement. "My dear ones," she said, "thank you so much for kindly coming here. In honour of this most auspicious day, I have made ready for you in the grounds of Mansaricu a very

small and unworthy feast. I have no doubt that you will find fare much surpassing my paltry offering upon your boards at home, but if you will condescend this night to ~~eat~~ eat at the tables of my house, you would do me great honour.

A cheer rose up from the crowd, but the Lady Marya quickly turned the applause away from herself. "All hail the Great Crusade!" She cried above the noise.

"Hail! Hail! Hail!" came the response.

"Hail the Holy Amazons that shall deliver the middle-world!"

"Hail the most saintly innocents, bearers of light into the darkness!"

"Hail to the Princess Mariamne, and to her worthy Nikraya that she has sent unto us!"

"Hail to the Daike Khien Terysien that is friend to Saint Arien and sworn defender of our holy Temple!"

The banquet was a truly magnificent affair. The Daike Khien had consented to use her charioteer to bring a ransparani of the culinary art all the way from Annapolis to Annapolita. Mansarian's own reserves, brought out of hiding, were supplemented by provisions supplied by the Amazon commissariat, and an Amazon hunting-party had contributed two wild boars. It was probably the first and only time that a banquet at Mansarian had come as a real surprise to the people. Usually, although pretending to be surprised, in accordance with customary etiquette, the preparations would have attracted attention weeks

in advance, and indeed, many town and village people would have been directly and indirectly involved with them. This time, however, with many of the supplies coming from outside, with the work being shared wholly between the Mansarian staff, under the strict surveillance of the Seneschal, and the Amazons, and with so many strange happenings and mysterious Amazon comings and goings, the feast quite genuinely took everyone by surprise. Nor had there for many generations been a banquet on such a scale. Row upon row of long tressle-tables filled the great walled garden, each with a ~~for~~ fringed white parasol at its head to honour the head of the table, for each of the major households was provided with a table of its own.

It was usual on such occasions for groups from the town and from the villages to spend several weeks in preparing "spontaneous" entertainments for the surprise banquets; but since on this occasion for groups from the town and from the villages to spend several weeks in preparing "spontaneous" entertainments for the surprise banquets; but since on this occasion that had not been possible, their place was filled by the Amazons. They played western music and performed the dragon-dance. They displayed the breathtaking sword dance in which sword clashed against sword and pelta (the light Amazon moon-shield) with terrifying speed and force and uncanny precision. They gave displays of archery and fire-leaping, but the Nikraya refused permission for a makeshift

chariot race. They raised the thrilling warchants of their two legions.

"Thy people are practised in the chant, & warrant," said one of the two elder Inozumi who had been on the platform in the town square, having made her salutation to the Lady Marga.

"In truth, mother," she returned, greatly pleased, "never before have we known this manner of devotion."

"Well, ye shall come to know it well before the White Amazons be gone from ye, for it is a goodly way for us in these late times, that have not the wisdom of our mothers."

"Truly, we are ever most pleased to receive the ways and counsel of the learned, my mother."

The Mikaya approached them and made her salutation. She turned to the Lady Marga. "My Lady, the provisions are all made ready. Our company, in its greater part, doth leave Sain Arien on the day after this morrow; a little number will remain at the town, and a lesser shall go unto each of the villages, in accordance with our custom. Should you require their assistance in the return unto the law, they shall be at thy bidding, though I doubt we then wilt have need. Other, they shall render service unto thy people in keeping with their estate. But their most important reason for abiding here is that they form a little thread in the great web that is spun for the defence of the entire

land of Annapolita, and so also for the defence of thine own people. Should thunder come in from the East..."

"From the East..." interrupted the Vicar.

"Aye, from the East. I know well that all thy troubles have come from the West, but the West is now subdued and doth lie in the hand of Themis. This Summertide, the war shall move eastward, and shall be harder fought, perhaps, than ever it hath been. We know not but that the storm may return upon Annapolita or upon the other lands at the Eastward of the Western world. Most like it will not, but as it should, these soldiers shall be thy first defence; but they will be swiftly enforced from the little garrison at Annamatri, and a short time after from the great garrison at Annapolita. The Amazons shall keep a good watch; but should any thing troublous be seen by the shepherds on the hills or by any of thy people, let it be made known to the Kefalle who shall have command over all the troops in Sain Arien."

"Shall the Daike Rhien be not with us?" asked the Vicar, a little disappointed.

"The Daike Rhien shall bide in Annapolita. As there is thunder in Sain Arien, she shall most like be with you."

Making her salutations, the second Daike joined them, and after some further converse, she and the Mikraya departed together to watch the swordplay at the

other side of the garden. They walked in silence until they reached the enclosure where the mock-battles were taking place.

"A passing fine stroke," commented the Daiké, as they watched a particularly skilled passage of arms.

"Aye, a passing fine," agreed the Nikraya.

"It is such skill as this shall bring the East into the hand of Themis."

"Yet I do think" said the Nikraya, "that the swordmaid shall not enact so great a part in the taking of the East as she hath done in the Western world, nay, nor the fire-plumed horses, neither."

"Why is?" enquired the Daiké.

"The Easterling is a most dangerous warrior," replied the Mikhail. "When he arose and broke the Wheel of Themis, the chivalry of the Western Empire rode forth against him, yet he stood firm and was not defeated. The imperial boundaries were narrowed by his advance until that time a great battle was foughten which was called the Battle of Varga. I doubt not that you will mind it from thy school-days. So Varga became the stopping place and the boundary of the Empire. From that day forth, the Empress moved not Eastward into Varga, nor the infidel westward beyond Varga, for it was a terrible battle that neither wished to repeat. The Easterlings that we have thus far met withal have been but a rabble of orgulous malcontents; but now we draw nigh unto the land of Varga, and we shall

encounter with the Easterlings proper."

"What is his nature," asked the Dukes, "and why is he so terrible?"

"The Easterling warrior is a footsoldier," she replied, "short and dark and heavily made. He doth carry a great pike or pole-axe, some eighteen feet in length, whose great steel head doth ~~had~~ add a further foot. So steadfast is their battle array that they do seem as a phalanx of moving wood, and before their line project not the pikes and of the first rank only, but those of the second, third and fourth likewise, like to a bristling porcupine of steel. Behind the fourth ranks, stand those with pikes held upright, in readiness to fill the gaps left by those who fall. And should the onset of the pikes be checked, their ranks will open to let through the axemen. These warriors carry an axe that nothing resembles the light Amazon labrys, but is full eight feet in length of its ashen haft, with a head of great weight which doth end in a sharp point. It hath a hatchet blade afore and a ripping-hook behind, and doth make a wound so loathly to look upon that even our doughty Amazon swordmaids may stand appalled. Wielded by these muscular dwarfs it will cleave through the Amazon helm or breastplate, or even through the heavy armour of the western men as though it were but foil. It will tear through the pelta and arm in a single blow. And with the axemen come the bearers of the morning star, a club five feet in length

set heavily with iron spikes about the end, and of the Vargonese hammer, which is like to the Easterling axe but that it hath three great ripping hooks at its head instead of a blade. Also they bear a great two-handed sword, thrice the length and five times the weight of the Amazon sword.

"A cavalry charge of the Western Empress was cut in pieces by the Easterlings; their horses breasts riven open by the pikes, their legs swept off by the great axes. I greatly misdoubt me whether even the charge of the Leaguer cavalry could break them; neither would the swift and light-armed Amazon footsoldier fare well in an assault upon that close-packed mass of heavy steel."

"Then how may we hope to prevail against them?" asked the Daika.

"Most skillful battle is that in which no blow is struck," quoted the Nikraya "most skillful next is that which is won with the least noise." This was the opening sentence of the Nikantrei, the great Amazon treatise on the art of war. It was a text that the senior officers never tired of repeating to those juniors whom they were grooming for positions of high command, for it contained the most important principle of their education. They had been picked out for their courage, their steadfastness, their skill, and above all, their vocation in the art of war. Now they must learn serenity, detachment and subtlety. Their hot-blooded eagerness for hard fighting must be curbed and refined into a perception of

war not only as a science but as an art; not only as an art, but as, before all, a sacred art.

The Nikcentrei was regarded not simply as a military handbook, but as a sacred text; and, this, indeed was precisely what it was, being in the tradition of divicentri, or magdacentri, "secondary scriptures" produced by great contemplative scholars by the application of the divine principles found in the Scriptures to some sphere of earthly activity. God created maid with a lesser bodily strength than man, the text explained, that she might fight with subtlety and with the Spirit. Let her once forget the true Way and descend to the use of mere material force, and man would have the advantage, the true Order would be turned upside-down, and the world would be set on the path which must eventually lead to complete materialism and patriarchy. Therefore, the arts of war must be spiritual arts, and the ways of war pursued with subtlety and gentleness. One example of this was the way in which the Amazons were not permitted to slaughter captives or to practise torture in the way that all the patriarchal armies did. To some extent this placed them at a disadvantage, but as their gentleness became well known, they turned it to good account by having their rumour-spreaders extol the good treatment of those who surrendered to the Amazons, and using conspicuously marked chariots to bear surrendered enemies safely

off the field of battle. This, together with campaigns of stirring up discontent against patriarchal ~~monarchs~~ rulers, often ensured a considerable number of the enemy being removed from the field by surrender without a blow being struck; the more so since many of them were often pressed men.

The rumour-spreaders and intelligencers - sometimes specially trained Amazons, and sometimes paid, or even unwitting, agents, were part of an extensive network of "quiet warriors" - the world's first, and probably best, secret service. They probed the enemies' ~~hidden~~ hidden weaknesses, made contact with the Old Believers within his walls, assisted deserters from his army, encouraged ~~too~~ rivalries and discontents within it, gave arms and money to rebellious factions, and in a hundred ways promoted his defeat "without a blow being struck".

The Daika smiled, for she was all too familiar with her mistress's meaning. "The path of Shearwind the Trickster may lead us far," she granted, "But a time must come that we must meet the Easterling upon the field of Nike the Warrior. Here then shall we do battle with the wooden porcupine?"

"The porcupine cannot shoot his quills," replied the Nikruga.

"I take not thy meaning, my lady."

~~"As the Varganese line."~~

"There is no archer in the world can match the prowess of the Western bowmaid," said the Nikruga. "Her swiftness and unerring aim shall deliver to us the crown of Varga when

that the time is come for battle. In our front rank we shall place two or three rows of footsoldiers. Each shall bear two heavy javelins and a great oblong shield. The shields shall be locked together to form a solid wall for the defence of the archers. We must choose our ground so that the Easterling shall be as far as possible hampered in his advance, and as he comes forward, the archers shall fire volley after volley into his midst over the heads of the spearmen. His great four-horse chariots, though fearful to behold are not formidable. Our light cavalry and mounted archers will prevent them from attacking our line, and if possible, attempt to turn his flanks; though of this latter we hold but little hope.

"As the Varganese line approaches ours, the archers must fall back, the spearmen will discharge their javelins from their slings and then disperse. Then the field will be left clear for the chariots. With the line thinned by the archers, and checked by the impact of the first and second javelins, a sudden chariot-charge, backed by the heavy cavalry and lancers will be able to penetrate it. Given time, the axemen would still be like to cut the horses in pieces, but they must not have such time. The charge must pass through them as swiftly as possible. Then will come the moment for your well-beloved swordsmen. Against the close-packed foe they should ill indeed, but with his line broken and spread, our fleet and nimble dancers shall have room

wherein to whirl and dodge and sting him at their will. Then shall the race go to the swift indeed, I think."

Both turned their eyes again upon the swordplay. With the grace and precision of a dance, with the speed of a whirling chariot-wheel, the maids went through their practised motions, drawing wonder and applause from their audience. The Mikaya noted another excellent stroke from the maid who had made the one that the Daiké had first remarked upon. "There is a fine warrior indeed," she said.

"Age, my lady." A greed the Daiké with a smile. "Her name is ~~Kenata~~ Renata. But she, I think, is destined to fight this war 'without striking a blow'."

"It may be so," said the Mikaya, gazing upon her with her wise and gentle old eyes. "For all her skill, she was not born to be a soldier. Yet I think she will strike a blow of no small import before her warrior days be over."

The great bell of Mansarion rang out over the fields. Great steaming trenchers were being borne out of the house, and the guests began to take their places at the tables.