

TALL DAMES GO WALKING

by

Rose Wolf

The woman had a voice like the dark of the moon.

Jorge Petronius turned in his bedroll, dreaming, remembering.

If she had not, then most assuredly the doctor—his lifelong love of, and belief in, the legends of King Arthur and Camelot notwithstanding—would not have been shivering in a sleeping bag among the rocks of the Cornish coast on New Year's Eve. But from the moment he had heard the dark voice of Faye Morganlee, Petronius had behaved like a man—he turned in his sleep again, for even his subconscious was discomfited by the thought—possessed. No, the attraction was not a romantic one, for the doctor's passion for life had always found an outlet in intellectual pursuits and he was in any case undistinguished in appearance and rather past the age when the hook of a beckoning finger could snag his heart. Nor did he know or particularly care (which was in itself odd, as he was generally prudent in such things) whether Dr. Morganlee's claim to be in the employ of Sir Pettyford D'Artois, the fanatical English collector of Arthuriana, was true. He only knew, when he reached the site of the proposed dig in a hitherto-unexcavated area between Glastonbury and Tintagel, that the woman had the money and means to conduct an expedition. Even her intense assurance that, if her ostensible

sponsor's researches had indeed guided them to the location of Camelot, Petronius's name would be ranked with those of Carter and Schleimann in the annals of archaeology was not the final deciding factor. Something else, at once more tenuous and tenacious, was: The sense that a force more powerful than himself—and, likely, than his contact as well—was at work in this matter, and that, for good or ill, in great or small, he, Jorge Petronius, had a part to play.

The woman had a voice . . .

. . . And such was its compulsion that the five members of the expedition—Morganlee, himself, and three graduate students from the Arthurian program at Edinburgh University—found themselves standing (in a pattern which the doctor could not help but notice described a pentacle, with Morganlee at its apex) on Christmas morning, spades in hand, above a spot which the woman assured them marked the resting place of the portal to Camelot. Specifically, she said, it was the capstone which had once surmounted the arch over the forecourt gate—*keepstone*, she called it, a word which Petronius mentally rendered *keystone*, conflating *key* and *keep*—that they would find here; and if the calipers at her belt had been a dowsing rod, her calculations could not have been more accurate. Again, the doctor's only wonder was at his lack of wonder; he knew that she knew.

At the group's humble Christmas celebration, Petronius had read them Tennyson's "The Epic," with its account of the passing of Arthur aided by the "three queens who would help him at his need"; but not even so fantastic a depiction could have prepared them for the discovery of that day. For by the following evening, the queens stood—or at least lay—in their midst: a regal but charming carving, in gold-shot quartz, of three crowned maidens who by their pose formed a crown of maidens. Two of the queens knelt at either side of the third, their inner hands clasping hers and their outer ones pointing downward to a section of the stone still buried by several upthrust menhirs which had

once formed the sides of the Camelot gate. This “stonehang” was far too massive, and too precariously canted, for the group to move unassisted, yet Dr. Morganlee had not been disturbed.

The woman had . . .

. . . merely remarked offhandedly to Petronius that if he wished to see the three queens clearly, he should wash their faces with water mixed with a little wine. As with her previous suggestions-of-power, the doctor had obeyed, and was first delighted to see the faces—lovely individual portraits, radically unlike the usual stylized Celtic playing-card countenance—glow forth like the mien of Galatea as she stepped from her pedestal; and then dismayed beyond words as the faces—disappeared! The texture of the stone beneath remained unaltered, so Petronius knew that the baptismal wash had not dissolved them; but where could they have gone? In order to distract himself from his grief, he ordered the three students into the nearest town to purchase equipment for shifting the sarsens, hoping desperately that the portion of the keystone which still remained hidden possessed carving of its own.

On the morning of the twenty-eighth, while working at the site, Petronius heard women’s voices approaching. Supposing that the students had returned, he looked up to greet them—and was astonished to see three strange girls looking down at him. Even more amazing than their mysterious appearance, however, was their apparel: All three wore identical outfits of pure white, apparently modeled on cricketing flannels though much heavier, and on their heads were—pith helmets! This ludicrous haberdashery and headgear was backlighted by the sun as the doctor glanced at them, so that for a fleeting second he had the impression that the light about them came from within. However, despite the fact that they looked like a cross between Indiana Jones and Doctor Who Number Five, they carried the requisite equipment and seemed earnest and determined.

They introduced themselves as the Philadelphia sisters: Carrie, a tall brunette, was the eldest; blonde Sperry, the

middle girl; and a petite redhead whom the other two had nicknamed—evidently for her tendency to say, “Keep the Faith!”—Fido.

“But who are you, and where do you come from?” asked Petronius in perplexity. “And where are my students?”

“Out of the Everywhere into the Here,” replied Sperry, cryptically.

“Born of water and spirit,” crowed little Fido, clapping her hands, like Peter Pan, in delight at her own cleverness.

Seeing the doctor’s genuine bafflement, Carrie was kinder. “At the moment, from Rederring on the coast, where we were assisting several once-wicked noblemen, ‘virtuous persons now’ and showing a red-blooded zeal for goodness—”

“Blue-blooded, too,” chirped the youngest.

“Hush,” remonstrated her sister, and continued: “We met the members of your expedition there, and when they explained your difficulty, we volunteered our services; they accepted and remained behind. You see, we are daughters of an architect—”

“No matter how you spell ‘arch,’” put in Sperry.

“Indeed,” Carrie assented. “So, as the villagers sing in Rederring, ‘Now, if you please, we’ll proceed.’”

Dr. Morganlee rose, smiling, and bowed to the sisters in a manner which struck Petronius as condescending, and prepared to lead them to the excavation. A glance of mutual recognition and—rivalry?—passed between them, and the girls looked as though they would have liked to draw back, but after only a moment’s hesitation they proceeded down the path. As his partner moved to follow, the doctor grasped her arm and whispered, “Do you know them?”

“All too well,” replied Morganlee darkly. “Nevertheless they have their uses, and they can accomplish what they promise.”

A short while later the leader of the group returned, an indecipherable expression on her face, and reported that the trio was at work, would require three days to complete its task, and might not be disturbed at any time during that

period by either Petronius or Morganlee. The doctor opened his mouth and closed it again, knowing he would receive no answer until the girls—or his associate—chose to grant one.

And so for the next three days Petronius lived in an agony of suspense. Each evening the Philadelphia sisters returned to the camp and joined animatedly in conversation on every topic but that of the dig, and each morning were gone before the two doctors awoke at dawn. Petronius strained his ears for sounds from the excavation but heard only singing; of the tunes but one was familiar—an ancient air called “Arthur’s Seat”—and the doctor reflected whimsically that if the legends of Camelot’s erection to music were true, perhaps the remains required to be constructed by the same mode—or modality.

On the morning of the fourth day—New Year’s Eve-Day—the two were awakened by the three and beckoned toward the site. Without a word spoken, the five hurried to the place—and Petronius cried in amazement. The pale light of dawn revealed the tumbled menhirs now ringing the excavation in a dolmen-and-cromlech arrangement precisely duplicating Stonehenge—but this formation, wonderful as it was, did not hold his attention long. His thoughts were all for the keystone—had its unearthing been completed? Above all, was it intact?

Oh, it had! And it was! The tri-pointed crown of quartz was now revealed to surmount a heart-shaped carving of sardonyx adorned with a commanding bas relief, apparently lifesize, of yet a fourth queen; and Petronius, kneeling breathlessly beside the sculpture, knew her as he had not known the three. The regal figure stood with her arms upraised to form a Tau-cross (and the doctor, calculating that her hands had been wrought to touch those of the kneeling queens, mourned anew the loss of the maidens—*what* had happened?), and from them depended a censer and a sword. Her breast was covered by a warlike shirt of mail, but her gown was womanhood itself: a “slow-dropping veil of thinnest lawn” which “wept away” from

her sides. So Venus might have stood, foam-fretted, at her rising; but (as Petronius murmured), “‘Thou art heavenly; shee an empty dreame.’” Smith of Excalibur, nurturer of Lancelot, spiritual adviser of Arthur himself: the Lady of the Lake.

Petronius lifted tear-dimmed eyes to the Philadelphia sisters, beginning, “I cannot thank you enough—” Then, abruptly, he saw that the trio was fronting Morganlee across the keystone with unmistakable animosity. The doctor returned to the present with a jolt. What was amiss? Was there a professional contest among the women and, therefore, a disagreement over who should claim the treasure? He was about to pose these questions when Morganlee flung up a hand imperiously. Once more an unspoken message seemed to pass among them, for after an instant they all bowed formally to each other and parted.

“Tonight,” Petronius heard her whisper as the girls passed from hearing, “by moonlight.”

The woman had a voice, yes—but why like the dark of the moon?

Sometime later, at an hour he could not place, Dr. Petronius awoke and knew immediately that something was terribly wrong. Levering himself up unsteadily on one elbow, he glanced down into the excavation, then collapsed back onto the sleeping bag with a gasp, squeezing his eyes tightly shut as the whole moonlit bowl of the site tilted and spun like an acrobat’s plate on a pole. When the world had steadied somewhat, he opened them again, taking stock as he did so of his physical condition. Other than the disorientation and dizziness, there appeared to be nothing wrong with him, which suggested that he had been—drugged! Abruptly he remembered the eagerness with which the aloof Dr. Morganlee had offered her own bottle of wine as accompaniment to the Philadelphia sisters’ scones. And he thought she had wanted to make their supper seem like

Communion! What was the—why did the word “witch” in its literal sense occur to him?—trying to do?

Already knowing what he would find, Petronius sat up once more, carefully, and looked down into the site. Sure enough, Dr. Morganlee’s sleeping bag was empty, and—the doctor drew his breath in with a hiss. The borrowed bedrolls of the three sisters lay equally undisturbed, the absurd pith helmets placed with touching tidiness atop each pile. At once, though he could not have told from whence the knowledge came, he knew that the four women were together, and not only in contact but in conflict—and he also knew where.

Rising as quickly as his still-considerable vertigo allowed, Petronius reached for his pea jacket and set off down the shingle path to the excavation, dressing as he walked. With a vague idea of fashioning some sort of weapon, he reached into the pockets of his coat to take inventory. His hand closed around the copy of *Idylls of the King* from which he had been reading at the campfire on Christmas Eve. Angrily he shook his head, and his drug-dulled ears added their own seashell roar to the boom of the nearing surf. What an altruistic fool he had been to believe that every member of the team shared his own lofty goal of securing proof of the existence of Camelot for the inspiration of despairing modern man! He had known that Dr. Morganlee did not, but he had supposed that her interest was at least purely (again, in a literal sense) academic. As for the mysterious sisters—surely they were more than they seemed (once more he wondered at the source of the intuition); but even if they had no ill intentions, who knew what their motivation was? He was about to throw the book away when a sudden flare of red like the leap of a new-kindled flame showed above the last boulders blocking him from the dig, and a coldly mocking laugh rang out into the night. Morganlee! If she had hurt those dear girls—

Slipping the poems back into his pocket, the doctor sprinted the remaining few yards and halted between two

tall stones separated only by a narrow cleft. He peered through this opening—and raised both hands to clutch at his hair, certain that the drug in the wine had affected more than his balance.

He looked upon a scene which might have come from Perrault, or from a pre-Raphaelite painting. Below him, at the site of the gateway excavation, now transformed into a giant scrying bowl as though the full moon which rode above were magnified a thousandfold in a pellucid pool, Dr. Morganlee stood confronting the Philadelphia sisters across the Camelot keystone. Gone from the girls' bodies were the foolish cricketing outfits; now each was clad in a jewel-hued robe of antique mode, hip-waisted and tippet-sleeved, Carrie in lapis, Sperry in emerald, and little Fido in a garnet the precise shade of her hair. On their heads were crowns of gold, and surrounding their figures was a lambent glow which might have been produced by the reflection of the moonlight on the stray mists which clung to the hollow, but which Petronius, watching with inheld breath, was certain was nothing so easily explained. The alteration in his erstwhile partner was even more dramatic: She was wrapped from throat to toe in a sable mantle which, as she shifted slightly, opened to reveal a hell-colored lining, giving the viewer the impression of gazing down a dragon's maw lit by inner fires. A black wimple enringed her proud face, and a crown of rubies encircled her brow; and she too was rounded by an aura: a red haze like that which passes before the eyes of men when the lust for murder seizes them. Red also was the naked blade of the sword she held, and its light seemed to throb with a pulse like the pump of blood, as though in obscene harmony with its wielder's heart. The unsheathing of this weapon, Petronius supposed, had been the cause of the red flash he had seen. Now, as he gazed on spellbound at the tapestry tableau, the dark-clad woman laughed again and brandished the blade, which kindled brighter in answer to her intensity.

“Nay, then, do your worst, and summon her!” she

taunted, curving her full lips in a scornful confident smile and gesturing at the stone which lay between her and the queenly maidens. "Summon your mother, my birth-sister, whom I 'prisoned in the keystone after the passing of Arthur, lest she return to him Excalibur and complete his healing! Aye, let her come forth once again to the light of our day, and learn how it has gone with the world since the triumph of my dear lord Mordred and I; and then, if despair smite her not on the instant, I will exile you together with her to a world unknown, that our rule of this wretched planet be at last unchallenged and utter!"

"From your own lips have you spoken your doom, Morgan Le Fay," said Carrie, the blue-robed queen, serenely, yet with implacable sternness. (In his hiding place, the doctor started so violently that he nearly lost his balance. Faye Morganlee, Morgan Le Fay? Incredible as it seemed, that explanation alone seemed to account for a hundred eldritchnesses in the woman's bearing and behavior. Yet if his former associate were in fact the Third Bane of Logres, then who—or what—were the girls?) "For in entering into the conflicts of Arthur and his kingdom, you made yourself subject to its law, and the law is that of God, which promises this: If one righteous man be found in all the world, the hand of wrath must be stayed. Such a one have we found."

"He will be the hope of our own world, and of many more," spoke green-gowned Sperry, her sweet face alight with expectation.

"His name is *petros*, like that of Simon Peter, of whom One greater than us all said: 'Upon this Rock will I found my Church.'" Fido thrust her diminutive chin out as she added this comment, her temper showing as zeal-red as her garb.

Morgan's lip lifted in a sneer. "And where is your paragon now? Abed, in a drunken stupor—and naked belike, as Noah, so that three"—she swept a hand toward the sisters—"might look on his shame, and have his curse for their pains!"

Fido took a step forward, hands clenched. "Noah, for all his faults and failings, was chosen to carry the seed of humankind to the Flood-cleansed earth—"

"—and his Ark," Sperry took up the refrain, "is a type of that Church which still ferries faithful souls to the heaven-haven—"

"—and our mother is her figurehead," finished Carrie placidly.

Again the laugh, again the wound-throb blaze of the blade. "Then bid your 'figurehead'"—Morgan's sardonic inflection gave the word its most negative meaning—"hither, to treat with the true rulers of the world; and afterward we will deal with the 'rock' on which your precious Church will be—did you say—'foundered?'" Her free hand stabbed down imperiously, pointing at the stone before them. "*Summon her!*"

Silent but undaunted, the three queen-maidens joined their right hands together, forming a living trefoil above the keystone; then, raising them still-linked upward, they began to wheel in a slow majestic circle as though about an invisible maypole. As they moved they sang, blending their voices in a harmony which soared and dipped and kissed and parted, raising a strain of such perfect unison that, though ancient as the song of the Morning Stars, seemed also the New Song of the Blessed. *They sing, and singing in their glory move*, thought Petronius, and wiped the tears from his own eyes.

And then, incredibly, he saw that the mist clouding his vision was not born of weeping alone. Down from the very moon, it seemed, a shaft of light was shaping toward the stone as though to provide the maypole for the living ribbons of the queens. Lower and lower it came until, piercing the ring of laced maiden-hands, it touched the surface of the sculpted heart. The sisters' song rose to a joyful climax, then silenced as though severed; and there in their midst stood a woman clothed not "with the Sun" but with the Moon. At the sight of her Petronius could have cried with Thomas the Rymer, *All hail, though mighty Queen of*

Heaven!, but he knew that, although this Maiden and Mother (*was never none but shee*) bore on her brow a crescent moon beneath the foot of a woman, she was closer, in truth if not in spirit, to the "Queen of Fair Elfland." He did, however, go so far as to murmur, "'For thy peer on Earth I never did see,'" and then reflected that he might have done better to say *peri*, for she had risen from her watery exile like Gilbert's Iolanthe. *No, like the spring from Moses' staff-struck rock*—the doctor felt his mind reeling—*no! Like Excalibur!*

Sword-straight she stood indeed, and tall, and beautiful; twin in every trait to Morgan—but only as the stars in their matrix of clean night are twin to the scum on the face of a stagnant pool. "Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful," her sleeve-tippets awash with the milk-opal luster of shell nacre, the woman's whiteness was unbroken save by a silvery corselet of scale-mail wrought in the likeness of a fish, its nose to her throat and its tail overspreading her hips. If Petronius had needed more proof of her identity, the two objects at her belt—a silver piercework censer shaped like a royal orb-and-cross, and a sword whose hilt was formed of two serpents, a red and a white, twisted in a figure eight and devouring each other uroborically—would have eliminated his last doubt.

"Hail, Mergyn Mere-Mistress!" cried Morgan, raising her hand in mock salute. The dark queen pronounced her sister's name so that it sounded, appropriately, like and unlike her own. Petronius heard the roots of the name in her speaking of it—*mare-gyn*, water woman, Lady of the Lake—and he knew that that, as well, was as it should be.

"Or perhaps I should say, 'Well met by moonlight, proud Titan'? Ha!" The Bane's laugh cut the night, a war-wolf's bark. "Have you slept well, shouldering not one world but many beneath your three-horned stone crown—" An epithet followed, but the doctor was curiously uncertain whether it was *cornice-* or *Cornish-woman*.

"Nay, Morgan, never." The White Lady spoke for the first time, and her voice said, *Ho, every one that thirsteth,*

come ye to the waters! “‘Uneasy rests the head that wears a crown’—or the heart”—she indicated the keystone—“and so long as my daughters send me word in dreams of the discord which you and your kind sow among men, I may never rest.”

Morgan did not reply to her sister’s charge directly. “Ah, yes, your daughters,” she murmured, eyeing the maidens appraisingly where they stood before Mergyn like three many-colored rays projected from her white radiance. “Faith, Hope, and Charity of the city of Brotherly Love! But I misdoubt me that men any longer desire such a New Jerusalem to be ‘built in England’s green and pleasant land’—or elsewhere in the world.”

Too numb for further shock, Petronius absorbed this new revelation with something approaching calm. So his three quondam “Rex”—cavators were in reality *Fidei, Speranza, et Caritas!* Well, he reflected wryly, *who else but the Cardinal Virtues could make haloes from pith helmets?*

Mergyn was visibly shaken by this statement; nevertheless she retained her composure and courage. “Aye, sister—yet our leader’s prophecy, ‘The old order changeth, yielding place to the new,’ may apply to ill custom as well as good, lest either in excess should ‘corrupt the world.’ And”—she paused to glance lovingly at the girls—“my daughters have brought me news that a renewal of zeal for spiritual things is aborning—”

“Corpselight upon a rotting tree,” jeered Morgan.

“Or *Corpus*-light upon a Hood-Tree?” countered the White Lady swiftly, but she was trembling. Observing her rival’s uncertainty, the Bane pressed her advantage.

“Brave words, brave words, Swordsmith-of-Myth-Sword; but dare you test their ‘mettle’ against—*Mordred*?” The dark queen’s tongue rasped the *edhs* of her lover’s name like steel leaving scabbard, giving it an Anglo-Saxon sound; and abruptly Petronius realized what the word meant: “Death-Dread.” “Lady, beware!” he whispered, clutching his book.

“I dare, aye,” replied Mergyn steadily as her hand closed

about the hilt of her weapon, "for this metal was tempered with a blooding from the side of the King-Stone, 'the Cornerstone which the builders rejected.' *Rex Caliburn!*" she cried, and drew from its sheath the worm-hilted sword, baring a blade which cleft the darkness like that "morn when first/God dawned on Chaos."

Death-Dread, in answer, rose like Doomsday.

The swords of the sisters met with an air-rending shriek like the loosing of a clothyard arrow; mingled lights leaped aloft in an aurora of blood and milk. Mergyn, seasoned veteran of otherwordly wars, was a graceful and strategical fighter, always managing to dance a cobweb's-breadth away from the smoldering blade of Morgan, whose dramatic tactics of backward-step and forward-thrust resembled the movements of a striking cobra (*Harmless as doves and subtle as a snake*, thought Petronius, and shook his head sharply. Why was his mind filled with the literature of legends when those selfsame legends stood, literally, before him? Unbidden to his consciousness came the answer: Both are *gramarye*, and that word means spelling and bespelling alike . . .)

In addition to her skill and agility, the Lady of the Lake had the deft assistance of the queen-maidens, who, as befitted beings identified with the Three Virtues, wielded weapons symbolic of their qualities: Faith a cross-hilted dagger, Hope a chain-swung anchor which she employed like a gladiator's trident, and Charity a heart-shaped shield. This arsenal appeared to have been drawn forth from its users' very auras, or perhaps it was a last bequest from the moonbeam which had unlocked the keystone; but whatever its origin, it served, in the hands of the girls, still enringing their mother as when they summoned her through the Gate, to provide a formidable extra defense. Circling about her in a continual merge-and-emergence of color, they seemed a trio of iris-winged cherubim sent to bear the Virgin Mary to Heaven at Her assumption. (*A cloud of witness—oh, God, enough!* thought Petronius. *Words and words—*)

—But—*pictures?*

Yes: All at once a flood of images, born of nothing in his own thoughts, began to pour through the doctor's mind. At first he could discern neither pattern nor purpose in the sequence; but with the first two distinct images he was able to separate from the welter, he began to guess at what they were and whence they came—to guess terribly. Morgan brought down her blade with a savage backhanded sweep—and *a merchant of ancient Pompeii, attempting to escape the eruption of Vesuvius, struck a crippled beggar-child into a gutter with his bags of gold.* Mergyn parried, contriving to protect all three of her daughters as she deflected the blow—and *farther down the Pompeiian street, now ankle-deep in blazing ash, a mother crouched over her infant, taking the Tartarean rain on her own back even after her toga had burst into flame.* The sisters were telling each other opposing versions of the saga of man, who, because he occupied the "middle state" between the devils and the angels, was therefore capable of acting as either! Petronius called to mind Guinevere in the Morris poem with her allegory of the two cloths symbolizing Heaven and Hell, of which it was said, "No man could tell the better of the two." So it was here: Both accounts of human history were equally true, depending on the beholder's perspective; but was man's dominant tendency toward good or evil? Was that what the queens were duelling to decide? A new question occurred to the doctor: If the women's conflict was a battle of wills, what, then, was the nature of their weapons? Both had the shape and sound of swords, and doubtless could produce the same damage if brought into contact with flesh; but how to explain the symbiotic pulsing which animated them, flickering low or flaring high as its wielder momentarily achieved the upper hand? Again, unsought-for, the answer rose within him: They are "swords of the spirit," ideas and ideals fed by men's thoughts and actions since the beginning of time.

On raged the conflict, and the parallel panoramas continued to unfold within the doctor's mind. Great battles alter-

nated with quiet peacetime scenes; the Bayeux tapestry of the powerful contrasted with naïf samplers of the obscure. The queens thrust and parried, the queenlets darted in and out, divine gadflies, gilded and stinging; and between the two forces gaped the still-open Gate, tantalizing glimpses of the worlds upon which it gave chasing each other across its surface like cloud-shadows across a wheat field. The contest, though pitched, seemed equal.

But in a matter of moments the twentieth century had been reached—and Mergyn began to fail.

With the death of Victoria, that formidable queen who had given her name to an era, came the birth of a new century, and—as one wrote who, though reared in the old order, contrived to find the Peace of God in the new—“a cloud was on the minds of men.” Religion had failed mankind, and science, widely and wildly hailed as the new creed of modern man, failed with the advent of the First World War in its perverted application to warmaking. There followed a period of decadence which spiraled downward into a moral and economic collapse from which only a second war provided relief; and this conflict hung forever over the head of man the Damoclean sword of instantaneous annihilation and added to the language a new word: *genocide*, murder not of one man but of a race. For a time thereafter the old mores held the world frailty united, but they were the last fruit of a tree which had already been hewn from its roots. Images came thick and fast from Morgan, a hellish hail beneath whose onslaught Petronius gasped and winced in empathy with the beleaguered Mergyn, railing with impotent despair at his powerlessness to aid the Lady of the Lake. *Dead fish floating belly-up in a dead stream, like maggots in a corpse . . . an enraged man striking his toddler daughter over the head with an iron skillet so that brain and bone splattered walls . . . a woman seeking spiritual guidance and finding only a book which advised her, “You have the right to say, ‘I don’t care’” . . .* And then—

—was Now, and Mergyn and her daughters were on their knees.

“You see how it is, sister,” said Morgan, her nostrils panting with triumphant exertion and her sword pulsing like a severed artery. “The swinishness of man is paramount and ineradicable in his nature by his own choice. Oh, nay”—she laughed and raised a silencing hand as she saw that her twin was about to speak—“I will not speak of the fiends in the Gospel swine, lest I hear that the Devil can quote Scripture. Rather let me remind you of that man of Odysseus’ crew who wept upon being returned to his human shape from Circe’s ensorcelment—I submit *him* as a type of your beloved humankind! This quality has already destroyed him, so depart from this world and let him wallow in his sty in peace—’let Grill be Grill, and have his hoggish mind!’”

Swinishness—

Suddenly another picture pierced Petronius’s thoughts—one born, again (yes, truly, “born again”!), of his own knowledge, not of race memory: King Arthur’s jester, Dagonet, answering Tristan’s accusation about his sordid past. The words, majestic in their humility, swelled in his mind like a cry of trumpets at the arrival of a king; and before the doctor knew what he was doing, he had stepped between the two standing stones and cried:

“The dirty Nurse, Experience, in her kind
Hath soil’d me; and I wallowed, then I washed,
And thank the Lord I am King Arthur’s fool!”

Morgan stepped back in astonishment and her blade lost a little of its glare. Mergyn, followed by her daughters, came slowly to her feet, hope raising its standard in her face; and the irrepressible Faith gave the doctor a thumbs-up sign by hefting her cross-topped dagger.

The dark queen made a sour little moue with her shapely mouth and glanced at her sister. “So this is your would-be

savior? Well, at least he knows the value of a dramatic entrance. But no matter."

Her eyes hardened, glinting with a spark of the same bal-fire which lit her sword. "Now that you are here together with my sister, I can attend to both of you at the same time." So saying, Morgan took a purposeful step around the crown-shaped finial of the keystone, advancing toward Petronius; then, abruptly, casting a fearful glance at his right side, she stopped.

Scarcely daring to believe his reprieve, the doctor glanced down, and gave a startled exclamation. The pocket of his battered pea jacket was lit from inside by the same silvery radiance as illuminated Morgan's sword. Sliding a cautious hand within, he brought forth the copy of *Idylls of the King*, which he had come so close to discarding on the path. The cover of the book was ablaze with a light which generated no heat but glowed like burning magnesium. On impulse, Petronius raised the volume in his right hand and directed its flash toward Morgan. Vampirelike, the Bane of Logres cringed and flung up a full sleeve to shield her eyes. The doctor's heart leaped. Feeling like Sam in Shelob's Lair lifting the star-glass of Galadriel, the doctor continued to hold the book aloft as he made to address the dark queen.

Then, from the corner of his eye, he caught a movement: Mergyn, who had been brought to her knees by the spirit-sword onslaught of her rival, had attempted to rise with the assistance of her daughters and had stumbled. Only a glance he spared in her direction, yet in that instant Morgan, momentarily freed from the binding of Petronius's book, was able to raise Death-Dread. A thin scarlet beam leaped from the blade and struck full upon the volume, and the doctor felt an agonizing shock lance from his fingertips to his forehead as though he had grasped a live wire. Only sheer strength of will enabled him to retain his hold. A hate-colored haze filled his brain, and with it a reprisal—or reprisal—of the moral degeneracy of modern man with which Morgan had assaulted her sister. Over these blood-

dimmed tidings rose a man's voice, crying out Arthur's lament at the fall of his kingdom: "All my realm/Reels back into the beast, and is no more!"

"A riddle for you, Sir George *Pen-Dragon*," came the Bane's lazy mocking voice. "Why are 'words' and 'sword' but the same letters differently arranged? Perhaps because both are the same weapon, which cuts two ways, eh? *Fool!*"

The lash of this last word caused Petronius to totter. In his upraised hand the *Idylls* slipped, causing the silver-gilt sword of the Lady on its cover to shine its radiance into his own eyes. Instantly the molten mist was dispelled and his mind was brightened to preternatural clarity. *And take the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God* blended in his brain with *We are all fools for Christ's sake*, and—

"Aye," cried the doctor in a voice which did not tremble, never taking his gaze from the book, "and the King my brother fool—

"Conceits himself as God that he can make
Figs out of thistles, silk from bristles, milk
From burning spurge, honey from hornet-combs,
And men from beasts: long live the King of Fools!"

With no astonishment whatever, Petronius now saw the picture of the weapon expand and elongate until it had engulfed the volume and become a moon-metal sword which rose like an Annunciation lily from a Damascus hilt fashioned as an open book viewed edge on!

Turning a triumphant glance to Morgan, the doctor saw that the dark queen's own blade was ablaze with a blood-bath glare so intense that it appeared to have drawn every drop of scarlet from her apparel and person, and perhaps from very heart as well; for when she swung it away and aloft from its resting place at her breast, it left a gulish swathing of stain on the lucent air. This was the moment of Fate, Petronius knew; but could his sword, however spirit-born, quench *this* "fiery dart of the wicked"?

Dart? he thought, and then he felt laughter well up in him and, with it, an atrocious pun. *Why, then, I must use it as a "d'art" to "mort her"!*

Swinging the wordsword three times about his head, Bedivere-fashion, the doctor cried, "Fall, battle axe, and clash, brand—let the King reign!" Then, with all his strength, he hurled the blade directly at Morgan's heart.

A soundless explosion rocked the hollow; white light flared as though the moon had fallen within it. Petronius was thrown forward into the ring of stones, fell, and struck his head a glancing blow on the edge of the keystone. Before he lost consciousness, he caught enough of a glimpse of the excavation to see that the dark queen had disappeared. *Really, he thought before the blackness took him, I ought to stop making such dreadful jokes, but it looks as though one "battle axe" just did "fall."* Then he pitched down at Mergyn's feet and lay still.

A cool hand was on his brow and a sweet savor in his nostrils.

Sometime later, Petronius returned to consciousness like a near-drowned man rising from a wreck. *From the great deep*, he thought muzzily, then chided himself for applying Merlin's prophecy about Arthur to his own case. Opening his eyes, he discovered himself lying with his head in the lap of Mergyn, who was passing her censer beneath his nose and stroking his forehead. Her face, as she bent over him, glowed like a second moon, and the horns of her crescent crown formed a frame for the Lady of the Night as She floated above. *Hathor*, he thought, *Ishtaroth*, and suddenly the unearthliness of the woman struck him with full force. Reading his fear in his eyes, the sorceress said softly, "Do not be afraid; you are safe and unharmed, and, although my daughters have left us, my sister has also gone."

"Morgan—dead?" asked the doctor as Mergyn assisted him to a sitting position.

"Alas, no," sighed the witch-queen, bowing her head so that the umbra of the moon-sigil swept across her white

face in a death-scythe waning. "She has returned to our world, and my heart forebodes that, ere she finally be defeated, she—Opener of Gates and Commander of Shadows—will cause many men's souls to take wing and make the very name of woman to be abhorred."

At these words, Petronius bowed his own head. "I am more sorry for this deed than for any error I have made in my life—to have visited the *Fata Morgana* upon your people," he said quietly. "But, Lady"—here he dared to raise his eyes and meet those of Mergyn, for his desire for knowledge could not be suppressed despite his feeling of guilt—"if it is permitted to you to speak of such things, who are your kind and what is your country, and why did you choose the Age of Arthur as the time in which to enter our world?"

The Lake-Lady smiled indulgently. "Is there anything you do *not* wish to know?" The doctor felt more like a hobbit than ever—this time like Peregrin Took, receiving un hoped-for answers to his questions about the mysteries of Middle-Earth while riding with Gandalf to Rohan—but he was determined to bite the apple of knowledge, were it only a pippin. Matching grin for grin, he shook his head.

"Very well, then," she replied. "From the Keeper-to-Be of the Great Gate such lore may not be hidden, but it is not comfortable learning, although it may give you courage for the task ahead." As she spoke, Mergyn told the links of her censer-chain through her fingers like the beads of a rosary, as though she would anchor herself firmly to her adopted world while telling of her native one.

"The name of our land is Estcarp, and it is old, old and" (the word was indistinct; she might have said *variegated* or *Faerie-gated*, or *both*, thought Petronius) "so that it is, and has been, home to many peoples and powers. Most formidable of both are the wise women of Estcarp, whom the folk of your land—and many of ours as well—would call witches. Of this kin come I and the three queens, who are my daughters in spirit only, not in truth, for no woman can

be both witch and wife, or at least it has not been so in our day.

“Our duties are many for the healing and heartening of our own world; yet when we may, we bend our wills to the lands which lie beyond the Gates, if so be we may render aid without changing the shape of a people’s history, for direct interference is strictly forbidden.

“In the seventh century of the *Artifex*” (Petronius could not help noticing how close the God-word was to *Arthur Rex*) “as you measure time, Brutish Britain—‘brutish’ not only because founded by Roman Brutus but because men lived then little better than beasts—was ripe for such succor. There, we knew, might be the cradle of a civilization upon which no sun, imaged or imagined, might ever set; thus we were most anxious to play midwife to its birthing. Then came Arthur—”

“Arthur, yes,” breathed Petronius, unable to restrain himself any longer. “Was he of your race?”

“‘Where is he who knows?’” asked the Lady of the Lake wistfully. “We know only that one day he appeared in our country with a word like a signal, a standard, a song—and that we followed him.”

“There has been One in our own land,” murmured the doctor, “of whom the same has been said.”

“Indeed,” replied Mergyn. “The King will follow Christ, and men the King,’ and thus did they—and we. Passing through this Gate”—the sorceress gestured toward the keystone—“Morgan, the maidens, and myself, with many others, entered this world and bound ourselves to its laws for good or ill. It was for that reason—because ‘Man’s word is God in Man’ and therefore that any telling of our tale has the power of, and over, the tale itself—that you were able to defeat Morgan by literally”—here the queen paused and a mischievous twinkle star-touched her eyes—“‘throwing the book’ at her.”

Quickly as she had brightened, however, Mergyn sobered. “That was a mighty deed and worthy in its own right

of a wording in the tale—but it is only as the tuning of the minstrel's harp ere the lay is begun compared to what you may yet achieve if you will." The sorceress's hands and eyes caught those of Petronius and held both fast.

In the most natural gesture he had ever made, the doctor went to his knees. "What must I do?" he whispered, his memory finishing the question for him, in all humility, with, not "to be saved," but "to be savior."

Mergyn released her grasp, stood, and drew her sword. In the mist of the waning night, still silver-lit though the moon had nearly set, the blade dimpled with its waterlight like the "ripply washing in the reeds" seen by Sir Bedivere as he returned Excalibur to the Lady at Arthur's passing. *No*, thought Petronius, as the weapon descended toward him, *this is the hour for the taking up of the sword: "The time to cast away/Is yet far off."*

The point of the blade now hovered at his right ear. Glancing down its length—he could not entirely quiet his fear—he saw that it bore an inscription. In letters aglow as though firenew he read, in blended Anglo-Saxon/Runic, the command, "Nimap mee," "Seize Me," the "Take Me Up" of Tennyson. Yes, he had been right!

"George of the House of Petronius," the lady intoned, "vigil and vision have you endured this night, in-sight"—she spoke the two words as one—"of the Siege Perilous, and therefore are fitted to the Fellowship of the Round Table, 'image of the mighty world.' Learn, then, your duty and delight as Guardian of the Gate!"

With the flat of the blade she struck his right cheek a slight but smarting blow; then, passing the weapon over his head, repeated the stroke on the left side of his face. Without looking up, the doctor knew that an arc of the sword's own brilliance stood in the air above him like a glory. As this Pentecostal spirit passed over him, "the hair of his head stood up"; then, sinking swiftly through scalp and skull, it kindled in his brain to a bright panorama of images depicting the history of the Gate. He witnessed the shaping and use of the keystone by the Wise Ones of both pre-

human and human Estcarp; its service—and here the doctor would have slowed, have *frozen* the sequence if he could—as Gate to ancient Britain for the sisters, the queens, and a group of warriors who must have been Arthur and his knights, though all were mailed and helmed alike—and the stone's subsequent function, loss, and re-discovery at the site of Camelot. And then Petronius saw what could only be his own future as Guardian of the Gate: His establishment of a reputation and refuge for good men who, hunted through this world without pity, would be forced to flee to another by a door as irrevocable as death; the universes whereon that door opened (again the doctor longed to stem the tide of mental pictures); and, lastly, the names and faces of the Gate-candidates themselves. Among these Petronius saw one whom he instantly felt could be to him the proverbial “friend that sticketh closer than a brother,” should the doctor ever know him: a fine soul but melancholy, who struck his observer as being perfectly described by Morris's line: “Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time.” Without understanding why, the latest-made Gatekeeper knew that no matter what heroic deeds he had been called upon to perform this night, none would be more important than the rendering of assistance to this man, for he, Simon Tregarth, was bound to, and bound up with, Mergyn's world, Estcarp . . .

Then the Lake-Lady's strong fingers closed reassuringly over his own and drew him to his feet, and she said, “Rise, *Sir George*, to whom be this title given: Petronius StéllArbiter, Watcher and Warder of the Portal of Stars.”

“Lady,” responded the doctor, “if my will and work may, in however small a measure, speed the day whereon that stone”—he pointed to the Gate beside which Mergyn stood, white and bright as a certain angel beside another stone centuries before—“may be rolled away, and Arthur come again, I shall be content.”

Petronius meant these words as sincerely as he spoke them; nevertheless, when he thought of the great king and his glory, he could not help but gaze at the portal and

mourn the fact that he, himself, though so very near, would never see Arthur. "*Lift up your head, O ye Gate!*" he whispered, and his eyes filled once more.

Again the queen took his hands. "Be comforted," she said gently. "Do you not think there will be a reward for your labors? When the time has arrived for your own passing, you are to come to Avalon, and our lord himself will greet you at the Gate!"

Petronius could not have spoken if he had had words.

"But now farewell," said Mergyn, loosing her hold and stepping toward the keystone, which had begun to glow like the moon behind a cloud.

"You are going a long way," returned the doctor, as in catechism.

The lady nodded; then, turning away from him to face the stone, she raised her arms and concluded her own stay on Earth with the parting words of her lord:

"To the island-valley of Avilion,
Where falls not any rain, or hail, or snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly, but it lies
Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard lawns
And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound."

Brighter and brighter grew the light which flowed from the opening Gate, streaming not only around the White Queen but through her, until Petronius thought that he must be able to see her soul. The witch-fire gave a final blinding flare, then sank to a soft glow; and when the doctor had stopped blinking, Mergyn, the remains of the radiance centered in her lovely face, was beckoning to him with one hand and with the other pointing to the Gate, as who should say, "Come, see the place!" Never more fearful, and never more desirous, of anything in his life, Petronius approached.

He found himself looking into the tower room of a castle or fortification, for its round walls were formidably solid,

pierced only by a single lancet window barred by a cross-beam. These walls were built of a white stone so pure as to be translucent, providing—together with the open window and the white-blooming apple tree it framed—sufficient light to make the room as bright as noon. In the center of the room stood a low catafalque draped with a gorgeous arras depicting knightly deeds, a “web with colors gay” which Petronius had no doubt was truly “magic.” On this bier reposed the figure of a man, formal as a tomb effigy in a stiff robe of state, although the doctor, who by some marvel of perspective was near enough to count the seed-pearls bordering his sleeves, could see his breast gently rising and falling. Had the doctor not watched that suspiration, he would, himself, have forgotten to breathe.

The sleeping king lay with his head pillowed on the lap of Faith, while to the little queen’s right Charity sat playing a Welsh harp and to her left Hope knelt burnishing a magnificent crown. Taken together, the three maidens and their monarch comprised a picture very like Burne-Jones’s *The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon*. What childe is this? Petronius found himself asking, then answered his question: *This, this the Christlike king!* And before this last and loveliest vision, he sank to his knees once more.

Then Mergyn’s hand was slipped beneath his chin and his face was tilted upward, and before the doctor could move or speak, Mergyn had planted a soft kiss on his brow, stepped back, and—in a final blaze of light which returned her to a pillar of cloud-fire—the Lady of the Lake passed into the Gate as Excalibur into the mere, “making light-ning in the splendor of the moon”—

—And then there were four queens in the chamber.

As Mergyn moved into their line of vision, the maidens raised what must have been a song of welcome, though Petronius could hear no sound. As they sang, the White Lady moved to the bier-bed of her liege, knelt, and, unbuckling her weapon-belt, reverently laid the legendary sword at his side.

Before she had drawn away her hands, Arthur stirred and opened his eyes.

As one, the three queens cried out with joy (and Petronius added his own voice to the accolade), and they hastened to kneel by Mergyn, forming a moon-crescent to cradle their renascent sun. But the king's eyes, when they focused, though they spared a glance of surpassing tenderness for Mergyn and the maidens, turned directly to Petronius.

The men's looks locked like the strike of steel on steel, and Arthur's gaze thrust past the doctor's guard to pierce the human to the heart. *I see thee what thou art!*: The accusation rang in Petronius's mind from memory, not the monarch, and the man started guiltily; but Arthur's look held only compassion, love, and—the new-made knight paused to blink the mere-mist—?—from his eyes, but there could be no mistake—respect, honor as of equal to equal. Slowly the great ruler raised a hand in benediction; and Petronius, "boldly approaching the throne," lifted his own in salute and cried in a strong glad voice, "*Ave, Arturus—Rex quondam, Rexque futurus!*"

Whether the Once and Future King heard his words or simply read his lips, the doctor did not know; but he acknowledged the speech with a gracious nod. Then Mergyn and the maidens raised their hands likewise; and forth from the five palms shot beams of blue radiance which converged in the portal to form a glowing pentacle. This symbol hung in the air for a moment; then, with a noiseless burst, it rent itself asunder, causing the doctor to flinch and cover his eyes. When he looked again, the Gate was closed, a simple plinth of stone, cold, dark, and silent. Beyond wonder now, Petronius ran his fingers over the keystone, knowing before he did so that he would find its surface solid to his touch. The cameo-panorama of Avalon and Arthur, at once centimeters and star-gulfs distant, was sealed behind its heart-shaped surface like a loved image in a locket—or memory in a human heart. Petronius cast himself to the ground and wept.

* * *

Mercifully he either lost consciousness once more, or slept; for when the doctor returned to awareness, it was at the touch of a glow on his lids, banishing the kindly darkness, which was not born of witchery. Opening them, he saw that the first rays of light preceding the wan winter sun had crept into the rocky hollow which cupped keeper and keystone. As he watched, the beams touched the Gate, kindling a rubescent glow from the sardonyx of the heart and an aureate gleam from the gold-veined quartz of the crown. Then, as the rim of the sun raised above the horizon, there was one last enchantment: The outline of the stone blurred and shifted, the colored of heart and crown flowing into each other like dross and gold in an alchemist's crucible. When it stilled and chilled a moment later, the keystone had assumed the shape of a featureless gray slab, indistinguishable from the rock of the surrounding shingle save by its symmetry. *The casement slowly grows a glimmering square*, thought Petronius, and laughed softly, heartened by the fact that he could make a joke when a truly divine despair was causing "Idyll tears" to gather in his eyes. Bending forward fearlessly, he picked up the slab, finding its weight no more than he could heft with ease, and settled it in the crook of his arm. With careful steps he climbed to the lip of the rocky cup, so lately the mere whereinto not Excalibur but the moon herself had been flung, and whose resulting ripples were even now spreading out to wash upon shores undreamed by gods old or new. Like Bedivere, Petronius stood facing the west, "revolving many memories." Finally, at peace, the doctor raised his free hand in a last salute and murmured, "Come again, and thrice as fair!"; then, turning toward the east, he fronted the fountainhead of day with his own transfigured face, the tablet of the New Law cradled in his arms: "And the new sun rose, bringing in the New Year."

Afterword

When requested to write a story for Tales from the Witch World, I asked myself, "Which of the concepts or characters in the Witch World series would I like most to know—and show—the history of?" The answer came immediately: that of the mysterious stone by whose agency Jorge Petronius transported Simon Tregarth to Estcarp. This artifact suggested, via the Stone of Scone, the keystone of Camelot and an Arthurian adventure for the enigmatic Gatekeeper. The story which evolved supplied a welcome opportunity to pay tribute to both Tennyson's Idylls of the King—my personal favorite of the many versions of Arthur's saga—and to the Witch World series as well, especially to the all-too-briefly glimpsed benefactor of its hero, who (to paraphrase Milton) "also serves, though only mans the Gate."

"Tall Dames Go Walking" was inspired by the life of Christopher Millard, a young man of great sensitivity and promise who, had he lived, might well have made a significant contribution to the field of Arthurian fantasy. His brief but beautiful fable of a knight's spiritual quest, written shortly before his untimely death from cancer at the age of thirteen, has given its name to the Four Diamonds Fund for Children's Cancer Research at Pennsylvania's Hershey Medical Center.

—ROSE WOLF