

The Icon of Ainênia

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Preface

In the telling of this story, it was inevitable that some greater matters should be mentioned, concerning the ancient Order of the Makers and the Nine Worlds. If this becomes a distraction, my apologies in advance; if (as I hope will be the case) you find yourself wishing to know more, there will soon be a remedy: the three volumes of the *Silverdale* epic, and their historical source book, the *Ennead of Edána*. See the back of this volume for details.

— P.J.H.

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The Sword of Truth

Some time after the fall of Rome, but well before the age of Steam, in a small village in a lost land to the west of Belerion, that is, present-day Cornwall, lived a strange, restless young man and his good wife Rosa.

The man's name was Calibur, an odd name for a Briton; he could read, which was also unusual for that time; and he was left-handed, which was considered by many to be sinister, and to cause a predisposition to the fey.

He was a swordsmith by profession, as his father had been. For, as his father had always told him, he had to eat, and the raiding barbarians had to be fought.

But Calibur hated the strife and killing for which the beautiful blades were forged. Above all things he wanted to grasp the Sword of Truth, to cut open the Book of the World and read what was written there, and learn what lay beyond. In fact, he wanted to apprehend the very essence of 'The One'. For his father, before he died, had taught him to read from a precious fragment of the *Enneads* of Plotinus the Greek, who taught that the Soul of the World, the souls of men, and matter, all emanated from The One, and to it will one day return. Calibur dreamed that once he knew the Source of all things, he could forge one pure, perfect and magical Sword to drive out the barbarians, end all conflict forever and reveal the One Truth to all lands. That, he thought, was the only hope for a solution to the murderous follies of mankind.

So he was ever driven to make one more sword, whether the last had sold or not, working late into the night in the hope that this would be the magical blade that reflected and penetrated to the Soul of that ultimate Truth, the Essence of the One on which he meditated as he worked. So far he had failed miserably, and his blades, while more beautiful, were not as strong and practical as his father's had been, and did not sell as well. And the villagers did not understand him, and so mistrusted him. But he did not care; he expected very little of them.

There had been one time he had felt himself approach his goal of capturing the essence of the One in a blade, fusing finite matter and infinite spirit. The furnace seemed to glow with a more than earthly fire,

the very Flame Imperishable, and his heart exalted as he beat the white-hot metal in which the spirit of Truth, the Logos of the World, seemed to shimmer with unlimited power.

But it had almost ended in disaster, when he pounded the over-tempered steel too eagerly, and it shattered like an oak-tree struck by lightning, sending fragments flying around the room. Some were buried deep in his leather apron; others embedded in the sturdy wooden walls. Trembling, he had thrown the fragments into a dark corner of the smithy, thinking to study them later, since he felt he had come so close with that blade. But first fear, then his young man's impatience to go on rather than back, kept him from returning to it.

Many days he would work on deep into the night, following his latest idea. Then he would walk home under the stars, dog-tired, disappointed, looking up at the glittering firmament and wondering how to do better the next day. Rosa's ducks would quack noisily as he approached the darkened cottage, and she would wake up and complain. Then he would try to talk to her about what he was doing, about his hope of making a Sword of Power, but she seemed only interested in sleep. So he would light a candle and read from the ancient book his father had left him, which spoke of the magic of the earth and of the various metals and their alloys, and the virtues which could be woven into weapons, which are made from ores buried in the dark earth, glowing in fire, hissing in water and singing through air to their mark. Rosa would groan and turn away from the candlelight, but he would read on until his eyes closed of their own accord.

He felt very frustrated in his high ambitions by his wife, who was (he thought, and often told her) just a simple-minded gardener who did not care about higher things. Even in the day-time when he spoke of his dreams she dismissed them, saying, 'The truth is in the soil and the flowers, my love, not in some book. And our hope for peace must be in our children, not swords, whether magical or not.' But so far they had not been able to have a child.

One day at dawn he left his wife planting out cabbages in the dew-laden garden while he went to the market in a nearby town to sell his glittering new swords, wrapped carefully in rags. There sat a stranger, peddling icons of the saints and wisdom books of various kinds. Calibur was in a hurry to set up his stall — he had to sell some of his stock or there would be no money to make the next experimental sword — but he stole a moment to look at the man's display. And in that moment one book gleamed in the early sun, as its leather cover was richly illuminated in gold leaf, and its title dazzled his eyes and made his heart leap:

The Sword of Truth
By a Disciple of
the Same

He was irresistibly drawn to it, in spite of his poverty.

'I must have it,' his mind said to his heart, and his hand involuntarily moved to pick it up. 'You cannot afford to buy books!' he heard his wife's scornful voice in his head. But never in his life had he wanted anything so much, not since the first day he reached out for the hilt of the toy sword his father made for him on his sixth birthday.

'So, Smithie, ye're drawn to that book, are ye?' said the rustic trader. Calibur pulled his hand back, but the trader went on, 'That book is one of a kind, it is. He who sold it to me, he's a seer. He says to me, "Don't you tell him, but the man who buys this book is destined to be my disciple and a great follower of Truth." Don't ye tell him I told you that, will ye?'

'And where does this "seer" live?' smiled Calibur, knowing he was being drawn into the trader's game, but unable to hide his interest or suppress his excitement.

'Up there in the mountains.' The trader pointed to the looming mist-shrouded mountains behind the village. Calibur did not know of anyone who lived in such an inhospitable wilderness, for he did not go to the tavern so had heard none of the stories told by the pilgrims who passed over the mountains. The trader saw his disbelief, and said, 'I swear, there's a hermitage up there, and a seer and all.' Calibur shook his head in disbelief and turned to go, but the man added:

'He also says, "Tell 'im to read what's written on the first page.'" The trader carefully held the book open so Calibur could read it. Under the exquisite illuminated title was a note in a clear hand:

Dear seeker of Truth:

What is written in my Book is sharper than any sword, and will cut to the heart of life, to the truth of all things, and set you free from this world's cares. With this book, if you dare to read it, you will begin to forge the ultimate weapon you have sought in vain in the valleys of the world: an enlightened mind. Then, you may seek me in the mountains, and I will teach you further.

'He reads my mind, about the perfect Sword! Fate has sent him to teach me how to forge it!' thought Calibur, his heart beating fast. He wanted to believe in such a miracle as this. But still he hesitated. He looked at the other items on the rough hessian of the trader's trestle. Suddenly his eye was caught and held by a beautiful apparition. It was an icon of a holy woman, painted on a small sheet of canvas. In her hands she held a glowing orb of white light. He stared at the picture, dazed. Slyly, the trader handed him the icon. 'She's beautiful, ain't she? I'll throw 'er in too, if ye buy the book.' He smiled, showing crooked teeth. Calibur had never seen teeth as ugly as the trader's, or a face as fatefully lovely as that of the woman in the icon. She was, he felt, the image of his perfect woman, pure and ethereal, an angelic companion to guide him to his destiny, which shone before him like the glowing treasure she held in her hands. His heart ached, as he gazed at her through a haze of lonely tears. He wanted to take her away from the trader, whatever the cost, away from the coarse clamour of the marketplace.

'How much is the book?' he asked, blinking away the tears. The woman's face seemed to glow, and her eyes reached into the depths of his soul, whispering to him of the new and higher path he was soon to

take. He felt the wheel of his fate turning now, opening up a new world, and he felt intense desire for her beauty, and also for the book's truth. He recalled the joyful lightness he had once felt at the brink of a precipice alone in the mountains at sunrise. But this was better: it had a definite object. 'This is the beginning of my true life!' he thought.

'What have ye got?' said the trader, reeling him in like a hungry trout in a mountain stream.

Calibur brought a sword and planted it upright at the man's feet. But it was not enough. 'This is a boy's sword, not strong enough for a warrior,' said the trader, weighing it in his hand and bending the blade. Then he spat. Calibur fumed at the man's crudeness, but knew he was right. He planted another and another, in increasing anger, until he had only the best sword he had ever made (apart from the one which shattered), by far the best, a great sword, which he had polished and honed only the night before, bending lovingly over it by candlelight while Rosa slept, rubbing it with rouge-impregnated leather until he could see his face in it as clear as crystal. He had even named it *Prometheus*, after the Greek god who had brought fire to mankind.

'Hand it over, then.' The trader beckoned insolently, eyeing it greedily, and Calibur felt an unholy rage, and imagined baptising the sword in the man's blood. But he was not a man of violence, and he wanted that book more than ever, now that he had laid out so much already to procure it. Slowly he raised his best sword and let it go. Its point pierced deep into the ground at the trader's feet.

He had nothing more to offer. Trembling, he spread his arms questioningly. The trader was surrounded by Calibur's swords.

'And where's the sheaths? What'll I do with twelve swords and no sheaths?' he asked.

'I do not make the scabbards,' said Calibur, barely containing his wrath. The trader stared at the row of swords and frowned.

'Still, it be the sign the old man told me,' he muttered. "'Twelve ordinary swords, this book be worth to the buyer!'" is what he told me! And so the trader handed over the Book called the *Sword of Truth* and took the twelve ordinary swords.

So Calibur returned home empty-handed except for the Book of the spiritual quest (he hid the icon from Rosa, knowing she would be madly jealous). As he had anticipated, even his buying of the book upset her. 'It is bad enough that you make instruments of slaughter,' she cried, 'and now you throw them away for a book! What will we eat?'

'You should have planted more vegetables instead of all those roses!' said Calibur.

'You should have made me a plough and helped me till the soil, and made me that fox-proof duck run, and helped with the compost heap!'

'Ploughs! Duck-runs! Compost! Pah! Women's work! This book you esteem so lightly speaks of divine truths, and with its help I will unriddle the mystery of the whole World, and my own destiny. Then I will forge the most powerful sword of all, the Sword of Truth, one that will cut down the enemies of Truth and found a glorious kingdom such as the world has never seen!'

'You're going mad!' cried Rosa.

‘God save us from your kind of sanity!’ yelled Calibur. ‘It would see us all raising ducks and tending cabbages until the barbarians come and bury us in our own compost heaps!’

But Rosa wept, and wondered where her husband’s folly would end. ‘It is because I could not bear him a son,’ she thought bitterly. Aloud she said,

‘I am sick to death of your evil swords and your meaningless dreams! I’m off to water the cabbages,’ and she ran off into the garden, slamming the door.

‘Damn your cabbages!’ shouted Calibur after her. Then he stormed off to the forge, and bolted the door. He opened the Book with shaking hands, and read:

Your first duty is to purify yourself, of anger, lust and all passions, to seek the One and find Him in pure, will-less contemplation.

Your second is to receive from Him the knowledge of your True Destiny, and follow it, for only thus does the kingdom of Heaven come to Earth, to free you from the Earth.

‘I want to do this, with all my heart!’ said Calibur aloud. And he saw a bright image of the perfect Sword, the Sword of Truth, running into its mould, and himself forging it in showers of sparks on the smooth forge-stone, and tempering it in the ice-cold springwater, the clouds of steam rising into a perfect blue sky. And in the vision he saw a woman with him, and he rejoiced. ‘It is the woman in the Icon!’ a voice whispered in his heart.

That day and the next, Calibur let his forge grow cold while he read the Book alone in the locked smithy, and he was inflamed as never before with the desire for truth, knowledge of the One, and spiritual glory.

On the first night he slept alone by the cold forge. And he woke in the night, and saw a light at the end of the bed, and it was the Perfect Woman in the icon who held the orb, floating in a sea of luminous night. He thought, ‘The orb is her own bright soul!’ and he felt his heart would break with joyful recognition and love, and his soul cried out to hers, ‘Where have you been all my life?’ And as he wept and communed with her soul, the vision slowly passed, and he thought, ‘Now I know she will lead me to my Destiny. Or is she herself my destiny? Yet I am married to Rosa. My heart will be torn in two!’ But he knew in truth his heart had already gone to the woman in the icon. ‘For with her lies my True Destiny, and even before I was born to this life, I knew her,’ he whispered to the night.

On the second night he dreamed that the woman of the icon held an open book, and in the book was a great mountain, and pilgrims like ants wound up its slopes towards a glowing vision of a golden sword hanging in the air by the topmost peak. And she told him that he must go with them, up into the mountains which the trader had pointed out, and there he would find his Destiny.

In the morning of the third day after he had sold his swords and bought the Book, he felt sure that he was on the verge of enlightenment, and no longer needed the softness of a woman, or the hope of a son.

So he left his wife and his father's forge, and set off to find the One, and his destiny, in the lost hermitage in the mountains where the Writer of the Book lived.

Before he left, Rosa gave him provisions, and rosehips from the roses in the garden. 'These keep the colds of winter at bay,' she told him. 'Go now, since you must, and may you find what you are looking for, and one day return to me!' He thanked her for the provisions, but mocked her faith in the rosehips. Then, his eyes bright with an other-worldly hope, he said good-bye. 'Rosa, I do not mean to return,' he said. 'My path and my true Destiny lie far away, beyond the mountains.' And he told her about the icon that had made him think of a different kind of woman altogether, a magical one who would join him in his quest, and enable him to find his Destiny.

She looked at him, tears welling up from deep inside, long hidden. 'I knew this day would come! I knew you were not content with me, a "simple gardener", and feared that one day you would leave me. But I thought, if I bore you a child...'

'Perhaps it is destiny, then, that we could not have children. But I know you will be happier with someone else. And I have rented out the smithy to the saddler, so you will not go hungry,' said Calibur, and his heart was heavy, knowing her pain. But even as he spoke, his great hope drew him on. And Rosa wept bitterly as he set off.

'I will wait for you nevertheless,' she whispered at last, and went back to the garden.

