

strands of rain through the limbs of the child. She rubbed her eyes and again she stared. It was so far. She could not tell.

Even the officials had climbed into the ivy-throttled elm with its broken limb that hung by a sapless tendon.

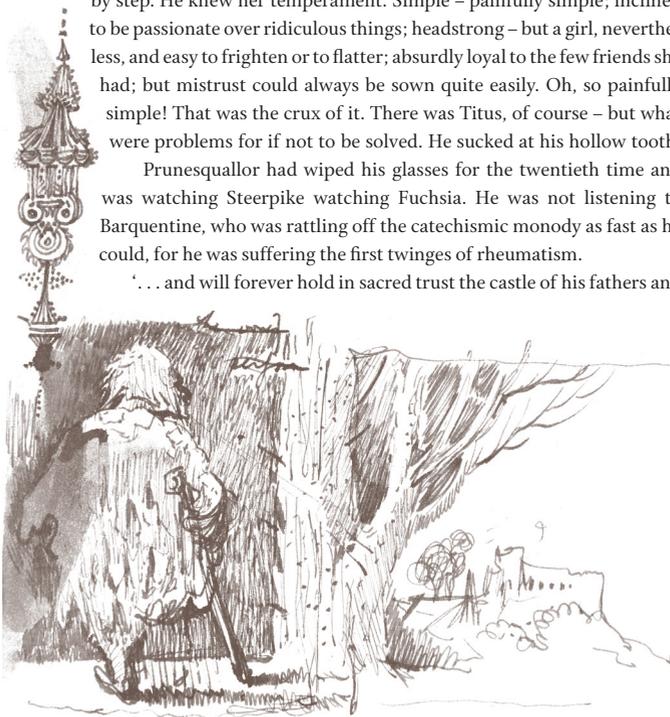
The Aunts, on the fourth of the cedar stages, shivered, their mouths tightly closed. Death sat with them and they could not concentrate on the procedure.

Barquentine had started, his old voice grating its way through the warm downpour. It could be heard everywhere, for no one noticed the sound of the rain any more. It had been so monotonous for so long that it had become inaudible. Had it stopped suddenly the silence would have been like a blow.

Steerpike was watching Fuchsia through the branches. She would be difficult, but it was only a matter of careful planning. He must not hurry it. Step by step. He knew her temperament. Simple – painfully simple; inclined to be passionate over ridiculous things; headstrong – but a girl, nevertheless, and easy to frighten or to flatter; absurdly loyal to the few friends she had; but mistrust could always be sown quite easily. Oh, so painfully simple! That was the crux of it. There was Titus, of course – but what were problems for if not to be solved. He sucked at his hollow tooth.

Prunesquallor had wiped his glasses for the twentieth time and was watching Steerpike watching Fuchsia. He was not listening to Barquentine, who was rattling off the catechismic monody as fast as he could, for he was suffering the first twinges of rheumatism.

‘... and will forever hold in sacred trust the castle of his fathers and



the domain adhering thereto. That he will in letter and in spirit defend it in every way against the incursions of alien worlds. That he will observe its sacred rites, honour its crest, and in due time instil into the first male of his loins, reverence for its every stone until among his fathers he has added, in the tomb, his link to the unending chain of Groans. So be it.’

Barquentine wiped the water from his face with the flat of his hand and wrung out his beard again. Then he fumbled for his crutch and hoisted himself on to his leg. With his free arm he pushed aside a branch and screamed down through the branches:

‘Are you skulls ready?’

The two Raftmen were ready. They had taken Titus from Nannie Slagg and were standing on the raft of chestnut boughs at the lake’s edge. Titus was sitting at their feet in the middle of the raft, the size of a doll. His sepia hair was stuck to his face and neck. His violet eyes were a little startled. His white smock clung to him so that the form of his little body was divulged.

The clinging cloth was luminous.

‘Push off, curse you! Push off!’ yelled Barquentine. His voice raked the water’s surface east to west.

With a long, gradual shoving of their poles the two men propelled the raft into deeper water. Moving up either side of the raft and plunging their poles a dozen or so times brought them near the centre of the lake. In a leather bag hung at his waist the older of the two Raftmen had the symbolic stone, ivy branch and necklace of snail-shells. The water was now too deep for them to strike bottom and they dived over the side and, turning, clasped the edge of the raft. Then, striking out, frog-like with their legs, they had soon brought the raft to the approximate position.

‘More to the west!’ screamed Barquentine from the shore. ‘More to the west, idiots!’

The swimmers splashed themselves around to the adjacent edge of the raft and once more began to kick out. Then they lifted their heads from the rain-prodded water and stared in the direction of Barquentine’s voice.

‘Hold!’ yelled the unpleasant voice. ‘And hide your damned selves!’

The two men worked their way around until their heads were very nearly obscured by the thick chestnut rim of the raft on the far side from the trees.

With only their faces bobbing above the surface they trod water. Titus was alone. He stared about him, bewildered. Where was everybody? The rain streamed over him. His features began to pucker and his lips to tremble, and he was about to burst into tears when he changed his mind and decided to stand up