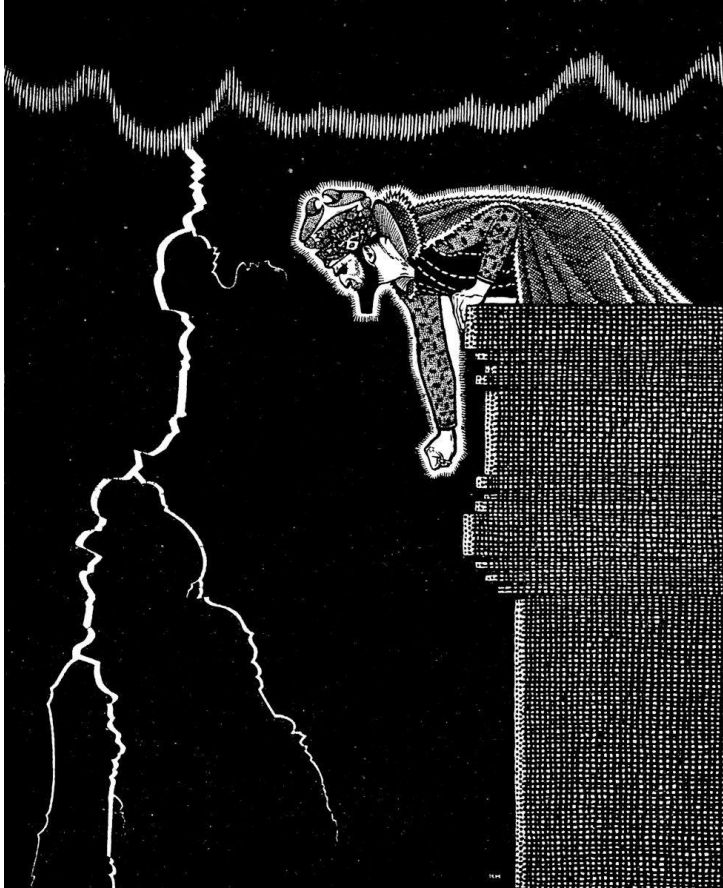


**THE WORM  
OUROBOROS**

**A ROMANCE**

**BY E. R. EDDISON**

# THE WORM OUROBOROS



GORICE XII. IN CARCÈ.

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GALING

TRUE Thomas lay on Huntlie bank,  
A ferlie he spied wi his ee;  
And there he saw a Lady bright  
Come riding down by the Eildon Tree.  
Her skirt was o the grass-green silk,  
Her mantle o the velvet fyne,  
At ilka tett of her horse's mane  
Hung fifty siller bells and nine.  
True Thomas he pulld aff his cap,  
And louted low down on his knee:  
"Hail to thee, Mary, Queen of Heaven!  
For thy peer on earth could never be."  
"O no, O no, Thomas," she says,  
"That name does not belang to me;  
I'm but the Queen of fair Elfland,  
That am hither come to visit thee.  
"Harp and carp, Thomas," she says,  
"Harp and carp alang wi me.  
And if ye dare to kiss my lips,  
Sure of your bodie I will be."  
"Betide me weal, betide me woe,  
That weird shall never daunton me."  
Syne he has kissed her rosy lips,  
All underneath the Eildon Tree.

•••••

THOMAS THE RHYMER.

*To W. G. E. and to my friends K. H.  
and G. C. L. M. I dedicate this book*

It is neither allegory nor fable but a Story to be read for its own sake.

The proper names I have tried to spell simply. The *e* in Carcë is long, like that in Phryne, the *o* in Krothering short and the accent on that syllable: Corund is accented on the first syllable, Prezmyra on the second, Brandoch Daha on the first and fourth, Gorice on the last syllable, rhyming with thrice: Corinius rhymes with Flaminus, Galing with sailing, La Fireez with desire ease: *ch* is always guttural, as in loch.

*9th January 1922 E. R. E.*

## THE INDUCTION

THERE was a man named Lessingham dwelt in an old low house in Wastdale, set in a gray old garden where yew-trees flourished that had seen Vikings in Copeland in their seedling time. Lily and rose and larkspur bloomed in the borders, and begonias with blossoms big as saucers, red and white and pink and lemon-colour, in the beds before the porch. Climbing roses, honeysuckle, clematis, and the scarlet flame-flower scrambled up the walls. Thick woods were on every side without the garden, with a gap north-eastward opening on the desolate lake and the great fells beyond it: Gable rearing his crag-bound head against the sky from behind the straight clean outline of the Screes.

Cool long shadows stole across the tennis lawn. The air was golden. Doves murmured in the trees; two chaffinches played on the near post of the net; a little water-wagtail scurried along the path. A French window stood open to the garden, showing darkly a dining-room panelled with old oak, its Jacobean table bright with flowers and silver and cut glass and Wedgwood dishes heaped with fruit: greengages, peaches, and green muscat grapes. Lessingham lay back in a hammock-chair watching through the blue smoke of an after-dinner cigar the warm light on the Gloire de Dijon roses that clustered about the bedroom window overhead. He had her hand in his. This was their House.

“Should we finish that chapter of Njal?” she said.



She took the heavy volume with its faded green cover, and read: “He went out on the night of the Lord’s day, when nine weeks were still to winter; he heard a great crash, so that he thought both heaven and earth shook. Then he looked into the west airt, and he thought he saw thereabouts a ring of fiery hue, and within the ring a man on a gray horse. He passed quickly by him, and rode hard. He had a flaming firebrand in his hand, and he rode so close to him that he could see him plainly. He was black as pitch, and he sung this song with a mighty voice—

Here I ride swift steed,  
His flank flecked with rime,  
Rain from his mane drips,  
Horse mighty for harm;  
Flames flare at each end,  
Gall glows in the midst,  
So fares it with Flosi’s redes  
As this flaming brand flies;  
And so fares it with Flosi’s redes  
As this flaming brand flies.

“Then he thought he hurled the firebrand east towards the fells before him, and such a blaze of fire leapt up to meet it that he could not see the fells for the blaze. It seemed as though that man rode east among the flames and vanished there.

“After that he went to his bed, and was senseless for a long time, but at last he came to himself. He bore in mind all that had happened, and told his father, but he bade him tell it to Hjallti Skeggi’s son. So he went and told Hjallti, but he said he had seen ‘the Wolf’s Ride, and that comes ever before great tidings.’”

They were silent awhile; then Lessingham said suddenly, “Do you mind if we sleep in the east wing to-night?”

“What, in the Lotus Room?”

“Yes.”

“I’m too much of a lazy-bones to-night, dear,” she answered.

“Do you mind if I go alone, then? I shall be back to breakfast. I like my lady with me; still, we can go again when next moon wanes. My pet is not frightened, is she?”

“No!” she said, laughing. But her eyes were a little big. Her fingers played with his watch-chain. “I’d rather,” she said presently, “you went later on and took me. All this is so odd still: the House, and that; and I love it so. And after all, it is a long way and several years too, sometimes, in the Lotus Room, even though it is all over next morning. I’d rather we went together. If anything happened then, well, we’d both be done in, and it wouldn’t matter so much, would it?”

“Both be what?” said Lessingham. “I’m afraid your language is not all that might be wished.”

“Well, you taught me!” said she; and they laughed.

They sat there till the shadows crept over the lawn and up the trees, and the high rocks of the mountain shoulder beyond burned red in the evening rays. He said, “If you like to stroll a bit of way up the fell-side, Mercury is visible to-night. We might get a glimpse of him just after sunset.”

A little later, standing on the open hillside below the hawking bats, they watched for the dim planet that showed at last low down in the west between the sunset and the dark.

He said, "It is as if Mercury had a finger on me to-night, Mary. It's no good my trying to sleep to-night except in the Lotus Room."

Her arm tightened in his. "Mercury?" she said. "It is another world. It is too far."

But he laughed and said, "Nothing is too far."

They turned back as the shadows deepened. As they stood in the dark of the arched gate leading from the open fell into the garden, the soft clear notes of a spinet sounded from the house. She put up a finger. "Hark," she said. "Your daughter playing *Les Barricades*."

They stood listening. "She loves playing," he whispered. "I'm glad we taught her to play." Presently he whispered again, "*Les Barricades Mystérieuses*. What inspired Couperin with that enchanted name? And only you and I know what it really means. *Les Barricades Mystérieuses*."

•••••

That night Lessingham lay alone in the Lotus Room. Its casements opened eastward on the sleeping woods and the sleeping bare slopes of Illgill Head. He slept soft and deep; for that was the House of Postmeridian, and the House of Peace.

In the deep and dead time of the night, when the waning moon peered over the mountain shoulder, he woke suddenly. The silver beams shone through the open window on a form perched at the foot of the bed: a little bird, black, round-headed, short-beaked, with long sharp wings, and eyes like two stars shining. It spoke and said, "Time is."

So Lessingham got up and muffled himself in a great cloak that lay on a chair beside the bed. He said, "I am ready, my little martlet." For that was the House of Heart's Desire.

Surely the martlet's eyes filled all the room with starlight. It was an old room with lotuses carved on the panels and on the bed and chairs and roof-beams; and in the glamour the carved flowers swayed like water-lilies in a lazy stream. He went to the window, and the little martlet sat on his shoulder. A chariot coloured like the halo about the moon waited by the window, poised in air, harnessed to a strange steed. A horse it seemed, but winged like an eagle, and its fore-legs feathered and armed with eagle's claws instead of hooves. He entered the chariot, and that little martlet sat on his knee.

With a whirr of wings the wild courser sprang skyward. The night about them was like the tumult of bubbles about a diver's ears diving in a deep pool under a smooth steep rock in a mountain cataract. Time was swallowed up in speed; the world reeled; and it was but as the space between two deep breaths till that strange courser spread wide his rainbow wings and slanted down the night over a great island that slumbered on a slumbering sea, with lesser isles about it: a country of rock mountains and hill pastures and many waters, all a-glimmer in the moonshine.

They landed within a gate crowned with golden lions. Lessingham came down from the chariot, and the little black martlet circled about his head, showing him a yew avenue leading from the gates. As in a dream, he followed her.

# I: THE CASTLE OF LORD JUSS

OF THE RARITIES THAT WERE IN THE LOFTY PRESENCE CHAMBER FAIR AND LOVELY TO BEHOLD, AND OF THE QUALITIES AND CONDITIONS OF THE LORDS OF DEMONLAND: AND OF THE EMBASSY SENT UNTO THEM BY KING GORICE XI., AND OF THE ANSWER THERETO.

THE eastern stars were paling to the dawn as Lessingham followed his conductor along the grass walk between the shadowy ranks of Irish yews, that stood like soldiers mysterious and expectant in the darkness. The grass was bathed in night-dew, and great white lilies sleeping in the shadows of the yews loaded the air of that garden with fragrance. Lessingham felt no touch of the ground beneath his feet, and when he stretched out his hand to touch a tree his hand passed through branch and leaves as though they were unsubstantial as a moonbeam.

The little martlet, alighting on his shoulder, laughed in his ear. "Child of earth," she said, "dost think we are here in dreamland?"

He answered nothing, and she said, "This is no dream. Thou, first of the children of men, art come to Mercury, where thou and I will journey up and down for a season to show thee the lands and oceans, the forests, plains, and ancient mountains, cities and palaces of this world, Mercury, and the doings of them that dwell therein. But here thou canst not handle aught, neither make the folk ware of thee, not though thou shout thy throat hoarse. For thou and I walk here impalpable and invisible, as it were two dreams walking."

They were now on the marble steps which led from the yew walk to the terrace opposite the great gate of the castle. "No need to unbar gates to thee and me," said the martlet, as they passed beneath the darkness of that ancient portal, carved with strange devices, and clean through the massy timbers of the bolted gate thickly riveted with silver, into the inner court. "Go we into the lofty presence chamber and there tarry awhile. Morning is kindling the upper air, and folk will soon be stirring in the castle, for they lie not long abed when day begins in Demonland. For be it known to thee, O earth-born, that this land is Demonland, and this castle the castle of Lord Juss, and this day now dawning his birthday, when the Demons hold high festival in Juss's castle to do honour unto him and to his brethren, Spitfire and Goldry Bluszco; and these and their fathers before them bear rule from time immemorial in Demonland, and have the lordship over all the Demons."

She spoke, and the first low beams of the sun smote javelin-like through the eastern windows, and the freshness of morning breathed and shimmered in that lofty chamber, chasing the blue and dusky shades of departed night to the corners and recesses, and to the rafters of the vaulted roof. Surely no potentate of earth, not Croesus, not the great King, not Minos in his royal palace in Crete, not all the Pharaohs, not Queen Semiramis, nor all the Kings of Babylon and Nineveh had ever a throne room to compare in glory with that high presence chamber of the lords of Demonland. Its walls and pillars were of snow-white marble, every vein whereof was set with small gems: rubies, corals, garnets, and pink topaz. Seven pillars on either side bore up the shadowy vault of the roof; the roof-tree and the beams were of gold, curiously carved, the roof itself of mother-of-pearl. A side aisle ran behind each row of pillars, and seven paintings on the western side faced seven

spacious windows on the east. At the end of the hall upon a dais stood three high seats, the arms of each composed of two hippogriffs wrought in gold, with wings spread, and the legs of the seats the legs of the hippogriffs; but the body of each high seat was a single jewel of monstrous size: the left-hand seat a black opal, asparkle with steel-blue fire, the next a fire-opal, as it were a burning coal, the third seat an alexandrite, purple like wine by night but deep sea-green by day. Ten more pillars stood in semicircle behind the high seats, bearing up above them and the dais a canopy of gold. The benches that ran from end to end of the lofty chamber were of cedar, inlaid with coral and ivory, and so were the tables that stood before the benches. The floor of the chamber was tessellated, of marble and green tourmaline, and on every square of tourmaline was carved the image of a fish: as the dolphin, the conger, the cat-fish, the salmon, the tunny, the squid, and other wonders of the deep. Hangings of tapestry were behind the high seats, worked with flowers, snake's-head, snapdragon, dragon-mouth, and their kind; and on the dado below the windows were sculptures of birds and beasts and creeping things.

But a great wonder of this chamber, and a marvel to behold, was how the capital of every one of the four-and-twenty pillars was hewn from a single precious stone, carved by the hand of some sculptor of long ago into the living form of a monster: here was a harpy with screaming mouth, so wondrously cut in ochre-tinted jade it was a marvel to hear no scream from her: here in wine-yellow topaz a flying fire-drake: there a cockatrice made of a single ruby: there a star sapphire the colour of moonlight, cut for a cyclops, so that the rays of the star trembled from his single eye: salamanders, mermaids, chimaeras, wild men o' the woods, leviathans, all hewn from faultless gems, thrice the bulk of a big

man's body, velvet-dark sapphires, chrysolite, beryl, amethyst, and the yellow zircon that is like transparent gold.

To give light to the presence chamber were seven escarbuncles, great as pumpkins, hung in order down the length of it, and nine fair moonstones standing in order on silver pedestals between the pillars on the dais. These jewels, drinking in the sunshine by day, gave it forth during the hours of darkness in a radiance of pink light and a soft effulgence as of moonbeams. And yet another marvel, the nether side of the canopy over the high seats was encrusted with lapis lazuli, and in that feigned dome of heaven burned the twelve signs of the zodiac, every star a diamond that shone with its own light.

•••••

Folk now began to be astir in the castle, and there came a score of serving men into the presence chamber with brooms and brushes, cloths and leathers, to sweep and garnish it, and burnish the gold and jewels of the chamber. Lissome they were and sprightly of gait, of fresh complexion and fair-haired. Horns grew on their heads. When their tasks were accomplished they departed, and the presence began to fill with guests. A joy it was to see such a shifting maze of velvets, furs, curious needleworks and cloth of tissue, tiffanies, laces, ruffs, goodly chains and carcanets of gold: such glitter of jewels and weapons: such nodding of the plumes the Demons wore in their hair, half veiling the horns that grew upon their heads. Some were sitting on the benches or leaning on the polished tables, some walking forth and back upon the shining floor. Here and there were women among them, women so fair one had said: it is surely white-armed Helen this one; this, Arcadian Atalanta; this, Phryne that stood to Praxiteles for Aphrodite's



picture; this, Thaïs, for whom great Alexander to pleasure her fantasy did burn Persepolis like a candle; this, she that was rapt by the Dark God from the flowering fields of Enna, to be Queen for ever among the dead that be departed.

Now came a stir near the stately doorway, and Lessingham beheld a Demon of burly frame and noble port, richly attired. His face was ruddy and somewhat freckled, his forehead wide, his eyes calm and blue like the sea. His beard, thick and tawny, was parted and brushed back and upwards on either side.

“Tell me, my little martlet,” said Lessingham, “is this Lord Juss?”

“This is not Lord Juss,” answered the martlet, “nor aught so worshipful as he. The lord thou seest is Volle, who dwelleth under Kartadza, by the salt sea. A great sea-captain is he, and one that did service to the cause of Demonland, and of the whole world besides, in the late wars against the Ghouls.

“But cast thine eyes again towards the door, where one standeth amid a knot of friends, tall and somewhat stooping, in a corselet of silver, and a cloak of old brocaded silk coloured like tarnished gold; something like to Volle in feature, but swarthy, and with bristling black moustachios.”

“I see him,” said Lessingham. “This then is Lord Juss!”

“Not so,” said the martlet. “’Tis but Vizz, brother to Volle. He is wealthiest in goods of all the Demons, save the three brethren only and Lord Brandoch Daha.”

“And who is this?” asked Lessingham, pointing to one of light and brisk step and humorous eye, who in that moment met Volle and engaged him in converse apart. Handsome of face he was, albeit

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