

A STRUGGLE FOR ROME

A Historical Novel by
Felix Dahn

Translated from the original German by
Herb Parker



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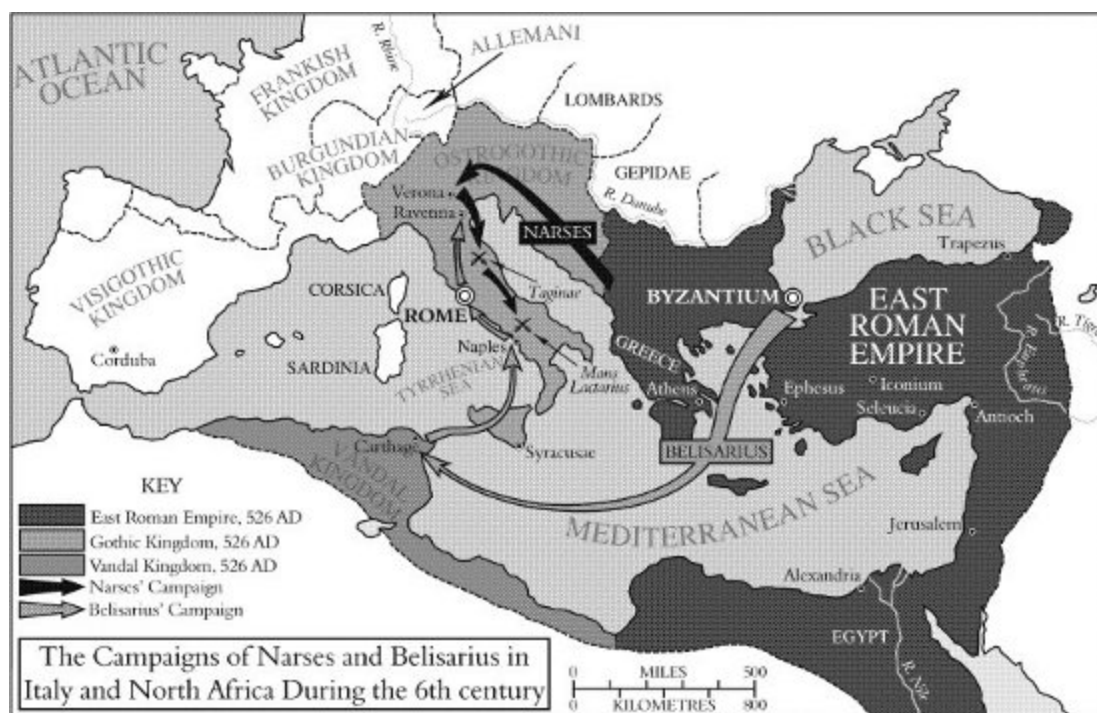
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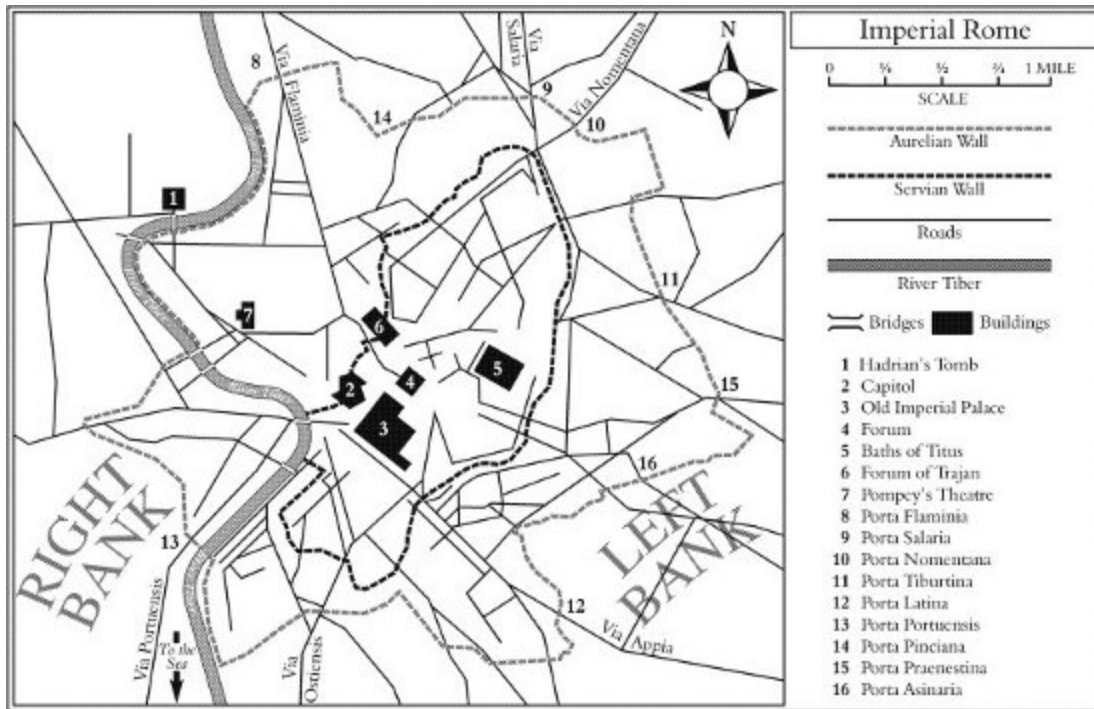
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Translator's Preface

The historical novel *Ein Kampf um Rom* (*A Struggle for Rome*), by the German historian and novelist Felix Dahn, was begun in Munich in 1859, continued in Italy (Ravenna) and completed in Koenigsberg in 1876. It was first published in German later that year.

The work was dedicated to Dahn's friend and colleague Ludwig Friedlaender, and bears as its motto:

“Wenn etwas ist, gewaltiger als das Schicksal, dann ist's der Mut, der's unerschuettert traegt.”

(Translation: If there is anything mightier than fate, it is the courage to bear it undaunted.)

The novel is set mainly in sixth century Italy, and partly in Byzantium, and it describes the decline and fall of the Ostrogothic Empire. It has been widely read in German and translated into a number of languages.

The story begins with the death in 526 AD of the great Gothic king Theodoric, who also appears with his “*Waffenmeister*” Hildebrand as “Dietrich von Bern” in Germanic mythology. (The word “*Waffenmeister*” is difficult to translate. It literally means “armourer”, but also implies tutor and mentor of a young warrior.) This book describes the fate of the Gothic nation under the various kings who came after Theodoric, until the final annihilation of the entire nation after the battle of Taginae by the Byzantine eunuch and general Narses in 553 AD, thus covering a span of twenty-seven years. Among other source material the author has drawn heavily on the *Gothic Wars* by contemporary historian Procopius, who also appears in the story. The novel closely follows historical fact, and all the major events described in the story actually took place. Judging by the great detail given by the author it is probable that most if not all of that is also historically accurate; to be certain one would need to have access to Dahn's original source material, particularly the writings of Procopius. As far as I have been able to ascertain most of the major characters in the story actually lived, the

notable exception being Cornelius Cethegus Caesarius, the Prefect of Rome, who is a figment of the author's imagination, although he may be based in part on one or more real characters. But such a man could have lived, and if he had much of history might have turned out differently.

In my present and entirely original translation I have tried to adhere as closely as I could to the author's words, using limited poetic licence only where a literal translation would have seemed clumsy or stilted to a modern reader. One problem has been with the names of the many characters, nations, places and tribes which appear throughout the book. As far as I reasonably could I have used the names with which an English reader is most likely to be familiar. In the case of well known characters, such as Justinian and Theodora, the choice was easy. Where I could find them I used names as they appear in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (i.e. Amalasuntha, Witigis, Totila, Teias, Belisarius), or the names used by Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and where all else failed I have simply used the name from Dahn's original. Where it comes to place names I have used modern names for well known cities (i.e. Rome, Naples) and the ancient names otherwise. To the casual reader the words I have used for either a people, a person or a place will not matter, and the historian will soon work out what each name refers to. The word "Arian", where it appears in this book, refers to the so-called Arian religious controversy, and has nothing to do with the "Aryans" which featured so prominently in Hitler's abhorrent racial theories.

Felix Dahn apparently wrote a number of novels, described by his critics as "professorial novels" because of the wealth of historical information woven into them. *A Struggle for Rome* is by far his best-known work, and the only one that has been widely read. I first read *Ein Kampf um Rom* as a twelve-year-old German boy living in China and attending a German school, on the recommendation of my then history teacher, and I have been fascinated with it ever since. Literature, like any other art form, is subjective, but for me there is nothing better than a good historical novel, and as far as I am concerned *Ein Kampf um Rom* has no peer.

It is my hope that the present translation will enable more English-speaking readers to read and enjoy this magnificent, informative and compellingly readable novel, and if so then the four years of my spare time

which I have devoted to the present translation will have been time well spent.

Herb Parker
Redcliffe, Queensland, Australia
June 2002

BOOK ONE

Theodoric

Chapter 1

It was a warm and humid night in the summer of the year 526 AD.

Thick clouds lay heavily over the dark plains of the Adriatic coast. It was difficult to make out details of the landscape and its many waterways in the gloom, interrupted only by occasional lightning in the distance, briefly lighting up the sleeping city of Ravenna. Gusts of wind howled through the oaks and pines along the crests of the hills to the west of the city. Once these hills had been crowned by a temple of Neptune, which even in those days had fallen into disrepair, and which today has disappeared entirely, but for a few barely recognisable traces.

It was quiet on this forest plateau, the silence being interrupted only by the occasional boulder torn loose by the storm, which would roll noisily down the rocky slopes, finally splashing into the swampy waters of one of the many canals and ditches which surrounded the fortress city on all sides, except where it bordered directly on the sea.

Now and again a weathered plate would come loose from the inlaid ceiling of the temple and smash itself into a thousand fragments on the marble steps, warning signs that before long the entire structure of the old building would collapse.

But these eerie sounds were as if they did not exist to a man who sat motionless on the second highest step of the temple. He rested, his back against the topmost step, his gaze directed in steady silence toward the sleeping city beyond the plateau.

For a long time he sat thus, apparently waiting for someone. He ignored the heavy raindrops which were beginning to fall, and which the wind blew into his face and into the magnificent white beard which covered almost all of the old man's chest with a blanket of silvery white, reaching down to his heavy metal belt. At last he rose and descended a few of the marble steps. "They are coming!" he said to himself.

The light of a torch became visible, rapidly approaching the temple from the direction of the city. Soon rapid footsteps could be heard, and shortly afterwards three men started to climb the ancient marble steps.

“Hail, Master Hildebrand, Hildung’s son!” the torchbearer who led the little group called out as he reached the Pronaos, or antechamber of the old building. He was evidently the youngest of the three men, and he spoke in the Gothic tongue with a peculiarly melodious voice.

He held the flickering light high in the air. It was beautifully worked, the handle of Corinthian bronze topped by a four-sided shade made of ivory. Without hesitation the young man placed the torch into a metal ring that held together the remains of the main central column of the building.

The light of the torch illuminated a face of almost godlike beauty, with laughing pale blue eyes. His long waving blond hair was parted in the middle and reached down to his shoulders. His mouth and nose were delicately formed, almost feminine, and he wore a light golden beard. He was dressed entirely in white. A white cloak of finest wool was held together over his right shoulder by a golden clasp in the shape of an eagle, and under it he wore a Roman toga of the finest silk, embroidered with gold thread. On his feet he wore sandals, fastened in the Roman manner by white leather straps tied in a cross pattern reaching to his knees. His bare arms were covered with broad bands of gold, and as he stood there, resting from the arduous climb and leaning on a tall lance, it seemed as if a youthful Apollo had returned to the ancient temple, just as he might have done in the distant past when it was still resplendent in its former glory.

The second man to arrive bore an unmistakable family resemblance to the first arrival, and yet differed markedly in appearance from the torchbearer. He was a few years older than his brother, and his build was broader and more powerful, of gigantic height and strength. His tightly curled brown hair reached to his bull-like neck, but his face lacked that confident and joyful glow which lit up the features of his younger brother. Indeed, his whole appearance resembled that of a bear, full of strength and raw courage. He wore the hide of a large wolf like a cape, its head crowning his own, and its shaggy fur dripping raindrops. Under the wolf cape he wore a plain woollen garment, and on his right shoulder rested a short, massive club fashioned from the root of a stone oak.

The third man followed with measured step, apparently deep in thought. He was of medium height, with an open face suggesting intelligence, honesty and integrity. He wore the brown cloak, steel helmet and sword of a Gothic foot soldier, and his light brown hair was trimmed straight across his forehead in the ancient Germanic style, as depicted on Roman victory columns. His regular features and his whole appearance suggested calmness, manliness and dependability.

When all three had reached the *cella* of the old temple and greeted the old man the torchbearer called out in a lively tone: "Well now, Master Hildebrand, it must be quite some adventure that caused you to call us together here, into this wilderness and on such a wild night. Speak, what's on your mind?"

Instead of replying the old man turned to the last of the three and asked, "Where is the fourth man I invited?"

"He insisted on coming alone," was the reply. "He turned us all away, but you know his manner well."

"Here he comes now!" said the blond youth, pointing to the other side of the hill, and indeed a man of most unusual appearance was approaching.

The full light of a torch shone on a seemingly bloodless face with an almost ghostly pallor. Long strands of shiny black hair, wet with rain, fell from his bare head to his shoulders in wild disarray, like a cluster of dark serpents. Melancholy eyes with long lashes under arched brows held a hint of inner fire, and a finely shaped aquiline nose contrasted sharply against a clean-shaven mouth and chin. It was the face of a man who had endured much grief and sorrow, and whilst his build and movements were those of a young man in his prime, his soul seemed to have aged prematurely with suffering. His chest and legs were clad in an expertly made suit of armour fashioned entirely of black steel, and his right hand held a battleaxe on a long shaft. He greeted the others by nodding his head and placed himself behind the old man. The latter now gathered all four men together near the column bearing the torch, and began in a subdued voice:

"I have called you together here this night, because there are serious matters which need to be discussed by loyal and dependable men willing to help, and in a place where we cannot be overheard. For months I have looked about me, among our whole nation. You four are the ones I have chosen because you are the right men. After you have heard what I have to

say you will understand why you must keep to yourselves those matters which we will discuss this night.”

The soldier with the steel helmet looked at the old man seriously and said in a calm voice: “Speak! We will listen and remain silent. What is it of which you wish to speak to us?”

“Of our people, of this our Gothic nation and Empire, which are on the brink of disaster.”

“Disaster?” cried the blond youth animatedly. His gigantic brother smiled and raised his head, listening intently.

“Yes, on the brink of disaster,” replied the old man, “and you four, you alone can avert it and lead our nation back to glory.”

“May heaven forgive you those words!” the torchbearer interjected passionately. “Don’t we have our king Theodoric, whom even his enemies call great, the finest warrior and the wisest monarch in the world? And then do we not also have this wonderful, smiling land, Italy, with all its treasures? What in the world can compare with our Gothic Empire?”

The old man continued, undeterred. “Listen to me. King Theodoric, my noble master and more than a son to me, is as you say a very great ruler, and nobody knows his worth better than I, Hildebrand, Hildung’s son. More than fifty years ago I brought him to his father in these very arms, a sturdy and lively infant, and said to him: ‘He is strong and of noble breed; he will give you much joy.’ And as he grew up I made him his first arrow, and washed his first wound. I have accompanied him to the golden city of Byzantium, and there I guarded him with my life. And as he conquered this beautiful country I rode ahead of him, step by step, and in thirty battles I held his shield. I know that he has found more learned advisers since then than his old mentor, but I doubt that he has found anyone more wise, and certainly none more faithful. Oh how strong his arm was, how sharp his eye and how clear his mind! He could be terrible in battle, yet so friendly over a goblet of wine, and when it came to sheer intelligence he could outwit even the wily Greeks. All of these things I had experienced a hundred times long before you, my young falcon, first left the nest.

“But the old eagle’s wings have grown tired. His many years of war weigh heavily on him, for he and you and your generation are not able to carry your years as I and my compatriots did. He is ill, mysteriously ill in body and spirit as he lies there in his golden rooms in Ravenna. His

physicians remark how strong his arm still is, but every heartbeat could strike him down like lightning, and every sunset could be his last. And who is to become his heir? Amalasuntha his daughter, and Athalaric his grandson. A woman and a child!”

“The princess is wise,” said the one with the helmet and sword.

“Yes, she writes letters in Greek to the emperor, and speaks Latin to the pious Cassiodorus, but I doubt that she thinks like one of us, like a Goth. May the gods protect us if she is the one who must hold the helm in a storm!”

“But I cannot see any sign of a storm, not anywhere!” the torchbearer laughed as he shook his blond locks. “From where can it possibly blow? We are at peace with the emperor, the bishop of Rome was appointed by the king himself, the rulers of the Franks are the king’s nephews, and the Italians are better off under our shield than they have ever been. I see no danger, not anywhere.”

“Emperor Justinus is a weak old man,” agreed the one with the sword. “I know him.”

“But do you also know his nephew, who is already his right arm and who will soon succeed him? Justinian is as dark as the night and as treacherous as the sea! I know him, and I fear what he has in mind. I accompanied our last group of envoys to Byzantium, and he came to our feast. He thought I was drunk, the fool, not knowing just how much Hildung’s child can drink. He questioned me at length about anything and everything one needs to know in order to destroy us. Well, I told him what I wanted him to think, not what he wanted to know, but I know it as surely as I know my own name; this man wants Italy back for the Empire, and he will not rest until he has wiped out every last Gothic footprint from these shores.”

“If he can, that is!” growled the giant.

“Right, friend Hildebad, if he can. But make no mistake; he can do a great deal. Byzantium is immensely powerful.”

Hildebad shrugged his shoulders in disagreement, causing the old man to ask angrily: “Have you any idea just how strong they are? For twelve long years our great king fought with Byzantium, and even then he could not win decisively. But you weren’t even born then,” he added, calming himself.

“Very well,” the giant’s younger brother interjected, “but in those days we Goths fought alone in a foreign country. Since then our nation has gained another half. We now have a home, Italy, and in the Italians we have brothers in arms.”

“Italy our home!” cried Hildebrand. “What a delusion! And the southerners our allies against Byzantium? You young fool!”

“Those are our king’s own words,” the youth replied, defending what he had said.

“Yes, I know them well, those delusions which will eventually destroy us all. We are foreigners here, just as we were forty years ago when we first came down from the Alps, and a thousand years from now we will still be foreign. In this land we will always be Barbarians.”

“But why must we remain Barbarians? Whose fault is that but our own? Why don’t we learn from them?”

“Be silent!” the old man cried, shaking with anger. “Be silent, Totila. Thinking such as yours has become the curse of my house!” Controlling himself with difficulty he went on: “The southerners are our mortal enemies, never our brothers. Woe betide us if we trust them! If only our king had followed my advice after our victory and wiped all who could carry sword and shield, from babes in arms to old men. They will always hate us, and with reason. Yet we are fools enough to admire them.”

There was a pause, and the youth continued in a more serious tone, “Do you really believe that friendship between us and them is out of the question?”

“There will never be peace between the sons of Gaut and these southern people. We are like the man who enters a dragon’s golden lair, and forces the dragon’s head down with an iron fist. The creature begs for its life and the man has pity, blinded by its glittering scales, and his eyes wander to the treasure in the cave. And what will the poison worm do? As soon as it can it will attack its benefactor from behind and kill him.”

“Very well then, let them come, and let this horde of vipers rise against us!” cried the huge Hildebad. “We will smash them, like this!” With those words he raised his club and smashed it into the floor, so that the marble plate smashed into fragments, shaking the old temple to its very foundations.

“Yes, let them try!” Totila added, his eyes aglow with a fire which made him look even more handsome. “If these ungrateful Romans betray us, and if those treacherous Greeks attack us, then look, old man! We have men like oak trees.” He allowed his eyes to rest with loving pride on his brother’s huge frame.

The old man nodded agreement. “Yes, Hildebad is strong, very strong, even if he is not quite as strong as Winithar and Walamer and the others I knew in my youth. And strength is a good thing against Germanic peoples like our own. But these southerners fight from walls and towers. They conduct war like an exercise in arithmetic, and in the end they can calculate an army of warriors into a corner where they can barely move. I know of one such master tactician in Byzantium. He is not a man himself, and yet he defeats men. You know him too I think, Witigis.”

The last words were addressed to the one with the sword, who had become very serious. “Yes, I know Narses, and I am afraid that what you have said is only too true. I have often had similar thoughts, but they were more like a dark foreboding. You are right! The king is nearing death, the princess is more Greek than Gothic, the Italians false as vipers, and the Byzantine generals veritable magicians in the art of warfare. But happily we Goths do not stand alone. Our wise king has made friends and allies everywhere. The king of the Vandals is his brother-in-law, and the king of the Visigoths his grandson. The kings of Burgundy, Thuringia, the Heruli and the Franks are all related to him by marriage. All nations honour him like a father, and even the Estonians send him gifts of fur and yellow amber from the far away eastern sea. Is all that—”

“All of that is nothing except empty words and pretty trinkets!” Hildebrand interrupted him. “Do you really expect the Estonians with their amber to help us against Belisarius and Narses? Woe betide us if we cannot win alone! These various allies will flatter us as long as they fear us, and once they no longer fear us they will threaten us. I have much experience with such matters as the faithlessness of kings. We are surrounded by enemies everywhere, some open and some secret, and we have not a friend anywhere other than ourselves.”

A silence followed, during which they weighed the old man’s words. The storm howled through the weathered remains of the old temple and shook the decaying columns.

Witigis was first to speak. He raised his eyes from the ground and said in a firm voice: "The danger is great, but I trust that the situation is not hopeless. Surely you did not call us together just to look helplessly at a threatening future? There must be some way we can help ourselves, and we want to hear from your lips what you think must be done."

The old man took a step toward him and took his hand. "Well said, Witigis, Waltari's son! Yes, I think as you do. We can still avert the worst, and that is why I have asked you all here, to seek your counsel where no enemy can hear us, and to find a way. So let each of you speak and offer your thoughts, and then I will give you mine."

As they all remained silent, Hildebrand turned to the black-haired last arrival. "If you think as we do then you too should give your thoughts, Teias. Why have you remained silent?"

"I am silent because I think differently from the rest of you."

The others were astonished, and Hildebrand asked, "What do you mean by that, my son?"

"Hildebad and Totila do not see the danger. You and Witigis see it with hope. I have seen it long ago, but I do not hope."

"You are too pessimistic," Witigis replied. "How can you surrender before the fight has even begun?"

"Are we to simply perish, our swords in their scabbards, without even a fight and without honour?" cried Totila.

"Not without a fight, my Totila, and certainly not without honour, believe me," Teias replied, his hand on the shaft of his battleaxe. "We will most certainly fight, and fight in such a way that men will never forget it in all eternity. We will fight with courage that will become legend, and with honour and with the greatest glory, but in the end we will not win. The Gothic star is setting."

"Nonsense! I think our star is about to rise higher than ever!" Totila replied impatiently. "Let us go before the king. Hildebrand, you speak to him as you have spoken to us. He is wise, and he will give us guidance."

But the old man shook his head. "Twenty times I have spoken to him, but he no longer hears me. He is tired and wants to die. His soul is clouded by who knows what shadow. Hildebad, what do you think?"

"I think," replied the giant, "that as soon as the old lion has closed his eyes we should mobilise two armies. Witigis and Teias will lead one of

them to the gates of Byzantium and burn it to the ground. My brother and I will cross the Alps with the other army and smash Paris, the dragon nest of the Merovingians, into a heap of rubble for all time. Then there will be peace both in the east and in the north.”

“We have no ships against Byzantium,” said Witigis.

“And the Franks outnumber us seven to one,” added Hildebrand. “But you mean well, Hildebad. What do you suggest, Witigis?”

“I advise an alliance of all the northern tribes and nations against Byzantium, properly sworn and secured by an exchange of hostages.”

“You trust in others because you yourself are true, my friend. Believe me, only the Goths can help the Goths, but we must remind them that they still are Goths. Listen to me. You are all still young, and each one of you loves and enjoys something. One might love a woman, another his weapons, a third some hope or even a secret sorrow which to him is like a loved one. But believe me, a time will come, a time of need even for the young, when all these joys and even sorrows become worthless, like the dead flowers from yesterday’s feast.

“During such times people become soft and pious. They forget what is here on earth, and instead they seek something beyond this life and beyond death. I cannot do that, and I believe that many among us, including you here, cannot do it either. I love the earth, the mountains, the forest, the meadow and the babbling stream. I love the life here on this earth with its fierce hatreds and enduring love, with its violent anger and silent pride. Of the airy life hereafter up in the clouds, about which the Christian priests teach us, I know nothing and I want no part of it. But there is one thing a decent man can cling to, even when everything else is lost. Look at me! I am like a leafless tree in winter. I have lost everything that brought me joy in life. My wife has been dead for many years, my sons are dead and my grandsons are dead, all except one and he is worse than dead for he has become a southerner. All those whom I knew as a boy and in my prime have long been dead and buried, and even my last great love, my king, is tired and not far from the grave. What do you think it is that gives me my will to live?

“What is it that burns under this white beard, that gives me courage and purpose to drive me out on a wild night like this, like a young man? I will tell you what it is. It is that deep urge which is for ever in our blood, the pull

toward my and our people. It is a mighty and enduring love to everything that is Gothic, to all those who speak the beautiful tongue of my parents and who live and feel as I do. It alone remains, this love of my people, like a fire which goes on burning in my heart long after no other glow is left. It is the holy of holies, and the most powerful force in a man's breast, to stay with him to the grave, utterly invincible."

The old man's eyes glowed with idealistic zeal. His long white hair fluttered in the wind and he stood there like a heathen priest from a bygone age among the younger men, their fists gripping their weapons.

At last Teias spoke. "You are right. This one flame still blazes where all else has long been extinguished. But it burns in you, in us, perhaps in a hundred or so more of our brothers. But can that save an entire people? No! And can that fire grip the masses in their hundreds and thousands and hundreds of thousands?"

"Yes, it can, my son, and I thank the gods for it. Hear me well. It is now forty-five years since the day when we Goths, several hundred thousand of us, with women and children, were trapped in the inhospitable chasms of the Haemus Mountains.

"We were in a desperate situation. The king's brother had been defeated and killed in a treacherous surprise attack by the Byzantines, and all the provisions he was to bring to us were lost. We sat between bare walls of rock, and suffered so badly with hunger that we were boiling grass and leather. Unscaleable cliffs behind us, the sea in front and to our left, and in a narrow pass on our right the enemy, outnumbering us three to one. Thousands of us had died from hunger that winter, and twenty times we had tried to break through that pass, in vain. We were on the point of despair. And then an envoy came to us from the emperor, offering us our lives, freedom, bread, wine and meat with only one condition. We were to be scattered in groups of four throughout the Roman Empire. We were never again to wed a Gothic woman. We were never again to teach our children our Gothic language or Gothic customs. Even the very name and character of us Goths were to vanish, and we were to become Romans. When he heard that, our king leapt to his feet and called us together. In an unforgettable, passionate speech he put the enemy proposal to us, and then he asked us to choose. Would we rather give up the language, customs and traditions of our people, or would we rather die with him? And his words

swept through the hundreds, the thousands and the hundreds of thousands, like a forest fire through dry twigs. A great cry arose from those fine men, like a roaring sea, and with swords flashing they stormed that pass! The enemy were swept away as if they had never been there, and we were victorious and free.”

The old man’s eyes glowed in proud remembrance, and after a pause he went on: “That alone can save us, now as it did then. Once our Goths know that they are fighting for that ultimate treasure, to preserve their precious customs and the language of their people, then they can laugh at Byzantium’s hatred and southern treachery alike. And this, above all else, is what I want to ask of every one of you, with all my heart. Do you feel in your innermost being, as I do, that this love of our people is the ultimate, the finest treasure and the strongest shield there is? Can you truthfully say with me: ‘My people are more to me than anything else in the world, and compared to my people all other things are nothing. To my people I will give everything I have, and to my people I will sacrifice myself if need be.’ Can you, will you say that with me?”

“Yes, I can. Yes, I will,” the four men replied in turn.

“That is good,” the old man continued. “But Teias is right. Even now many of us Goths no longer feel like this, and yet if we are to survive they all must. Therefore will each one of you swear to me that from this day you will work tirelessly, night and day, so that you and those of our people with whom you come in daily contact are filled with the spirit of this hour? Many, many of us have been blinded by the glitter of foreign finery. Many wear Greek clothes, and think Roman thoughts. They are ashamed to be called Barbarians, and they want to forget that they are Goths. They have torn their hearts from their breasts, and yet they want to live. They are like leaves from a tree, which the wind can blow into muddy puddles where they will rot. But the trunk of the tree will survive the storm, and with it will live all that adhere to it. That is what you must teach our people, and remind them of it constantly. Tell the young boys the legends of our fathers, of battles against the Huns, of victories over the Romans. Show the men how danger threatens, and how only our Gothic spirit can be our shield. Tell your sisters that they must not embrace a Roman or one who has become one, and tell your wives and your brides that if need be they must be willing to sacrifice everything, themselves and yourselves and your children, for

our Gothic people. And then, if the enemy should come, they will find us a strong nation, proud, united and firm, and the enemy will be destroyed like a wave on a rock. Will you help me achieve this?"

"I believe you," he continued, after they had all agreed. "But I still believe in our ancient customs, and the traditions of our fathers. Our aims are more likely to meet with success if we follow those old customs. I therefore ask that you follow me."

Chapter 2

With these words he took the torch from the column and strode through the interior of the temple, past the crumbling main altar and the pedestals of statues long gone, to the posticum at the building's rear. The others followed the old man in silence as he led them down more steps into the open.

After a few more steps they stood under an ancient stone oak, whose majestic crown held off rain and storm like a roof. Under the tree a strange sight met the Gothic men, reminding them at the same time of an ancient custom dating back to their heathen past, which their forebears had brought with them from their distant northern homeland. Under the tree a strip of the dense turf had been cut open, only a foot in width but several feet long. The ends of the strip of turf were still attached to the ground, its centre raised above the ground resting on three spears of different length, which had been rammed into the earth, the longest of them in the centre. The whole arrangement formed a raised triangle, and several men could comfortably stand under it between the spears. A brass kettle filled with water stood in a shallow crevice under it, and beside it lay an ancient slaughtering knife, sharp and pointed, hundreds of years old, with a blade of flint stone and a hilt made from the horn of a mountain steer. The old man approached and rammed the torch into the earth beside the kettle. He then stepped into the crevice, right foot first, and turned to the east, bowing his head. Enjoining them to silence by placing a finger on his lips, he then bade the others to follow his example. Silently the four men stepped into the hole and stood beside the old man, Witigis and Teias on his left and the two brothers on his right, and all five then joined hands to form a symbolic chain. Letting go of Witigis and Hildebad, who were nearest to him, the old man knelt. First he gathered a handful of the black forest earth and threw it over his left shoulder. With the other hand he reached into the kettle and

sprinkled a little water behind him on his right. Finally he exhaled deeply into the night air, his long white beard blown about his face by the wind, and waved the torch above his head from right to left.

In a soft murmur he began to speak, as if to himself: "Hear me, old earth, flowing water, light air and flickering flame! Hear me well and mark my words. Here stand five men from the people of Gaut, Teias and Totila, Hildebad and Hildebrand, and Witigis, Waltari's son.

"We stand here in this quiet hour to forge a bond of blood brothers, for evermore and for all eternity. We will be as true brothers in peace and war, for better or for worse. One hope, one hate, one love, one pain as we now combine into the one drop our blood as blood brothers."

With these words he bared his left arm. The others followed suit, holding their bare arms close together above the kettle. The old man picked up the knife, and with one stroke he scratched the skin of his own forearm and those of the four others, so that a few drops of blood from each of them fell in red drops into the kettle. He then resumed his former position and continued to speak:

"And we swear an eternal oath to give up everything we have, house, land and possessions, horse, weapons and cattle, sons, kinsmen and servants, wife and body and our lives to the good and glory of the people of Gaut, the good and noble Goths. And if any one of us should refuse to honour this oath with all its sacrifices—"

At this point he and the others stepped out of the crevice and from under the turf roof. "—then his red blood shall flow un-avenged like the water under this forest grass—"

With that he picked up the kettle, poured the bloody water into the ditch, and then removed it along with the other implements.

"—and on his head the halls of heaven shall fall with thunder, and crush him to death with the might and weight of this turf."

With a single stroke he cut down all three spears, and the strip of turf fell heavily into the crevice with a dull thud. The five men joined hands once more and stood together on the strip of grass which had now been restored to its former state. In a faster tone Hildebrand continued. "And if any one of us should fail to honour this oath and this bond, or fail to defend his blood brothers like a real brother, or to avenge their death, or if he should refuse to sacrifice everything he has to the Gothic people in their need, then he shall

for ever be damned. He shall live for all eternity among the dark powers which live under the green grass of this earth. The feet of good men shall trample on the traitor's head, and his name shall be without honour wherever Christians sound their bells or heathens make sacrifices, wherever a mother suckles her child or the wind blows, across the whole wide world. Speak, brothers, is that the fate which must befall a lowly traitor?"

"That is what shall happen to him," the four men repeated.

After a pause Hildebrand broke the chain of hands and said: "Now I want you to know why this place has a special significance for me, as it now does for you, and why I chose this place for what we have done here this night. Follow me!" Picking up the torch he strode ahead to the other side of the ancient tree, exactly opposite where the crevice had been in which they had all stood. To their astonishment they saw yawning before them an open grave, and beside it a slab of rock which had been removed from its former role of resting over it. There, in the depth of the grave, lit by the ghostly glow of the torch, lay three long white skeletons, together with a few rusty weapons, spearheads and the remains of a shield. The four men stared in surprise, first at the old man and then at the remains. Hildebrand looked silently into the grave for a long time. At last he spoke again: "My three sons. They have been lying here for thirty years and more. They fell on this hill during the final battle for the city of Ravenna. They all fell in the same hour, on this day. Jubilantly they threw themselves into the enemy spears – for their people."

He paused. The four men stood, deeply moved, each occupied with his own thoughts. At last the old man raised himself to his full height and looked up at the sky. "It is done," he said, "the stars are growing pale, and midnight has long passed. *Go* on back to the city all of you, except Teias. Teias, I think you will want to stay here with me. You more than anyone have the gift of sorrow as you do the gift of song. You and I will be guard of honour to these dead."

Teias nodded without uttering a word, and sat down at the foot of the grave where he had been standing. Hildebrand handed the torch to Totila and leaned against the slab of rock on the opposite side to Teias. The other three waved him farewell and descended toward the city, each one of them gravely absorbed in silent thought.