

From *Tales of Gom* in the

LEGENDS OF ULM

BOOK I

GOM ON
WINDY MOUNTAIN

BY

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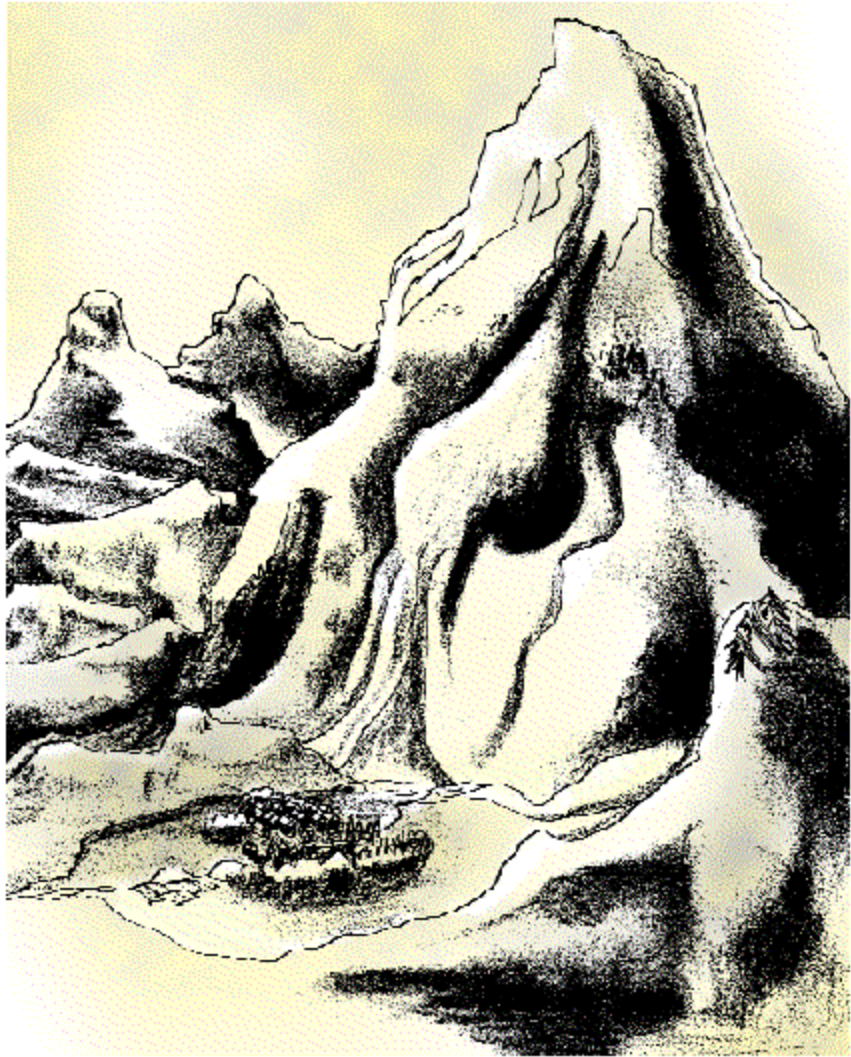
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For M.C.S.J.
with love.

“You’ve a singular mind, Gom; knowing and sharp. But at heart you’re still a mountain boy and no match for the world out there.”

—Stig of Windy Mountain



CHAPTER ONE



HIGH ON WINDY MOUNTAIN, ABOVE THE TOWN of Clack, there once lived a woodcutter named Stig. He was a simple man; big, with a big red face, a head shaped like an onion, and a thatch of yellow hair.

Now although he was a good man, a strong man, a proper man, he had no wife. As a matter of fact, the thought of getting himself wed didn't appeal to him at all. If he ever felt lonely, as he might sometimes on a winter's evening, when the wind blew the snow about his tiny hut, that feeling didn't last *so* long. He was on the whole too busy and happy earning his daily bread on the mountain to think much of anything else. Besides, there was plenty of company up there, of sorts.

One bright spring morning, he took his axe to the place where he was chopping logs to take down into the town. All through the spring and summer and fall, the townsfolk gradually piled his wood higher and higher around the walls of their houses ready for the next winter snows. And in return for the wood, they supplied him with victuals.

He worked and worked at his chopping until the sun shone down through the tops of the trees. Then he stopped and sat up against a stout tree trunk to eat his elevenses: a bite of rough oatcake that he'd made

himself on his gray stone hearth, and a swallow of water from an old green glass bottle. While he ate, he looked about him at the wild creatures that came hopping and creeping up for crumbs, close enough for him to touch: sparrows, rock doves, squirrels—even woodchucks—all talking at him a fair lick, and he listened to their chatter, as he did every day, wishing he could understand what it was all about.

That day, a small brown sparrow with quick black eyes hopped with great daring closer than the rest, scolding them and chasing them away, as if wanting to keep Stig to itself. Or rather, *herself*, Stig saw, for the sparrow did not wear the male's neat black bib. Stig scattered a few pieces of the oatcake before her, watched her take them into her beak and break them up, showering surplus crumbs right and left for the rest to scramble for. When she edged forward a mite nearer, her head to one side, Stig laughed delightedly.

"Are you asking for more? If so, here it is." He crumbled more of the oat flakes and scattered them a little closer in than before. The sparrow hopped nearer, and nearer, eyeing him keenly, then dipping down and snatching up a beakful, she flew this time up into the trees to eat it out of range. The other birds, catching the flirt of her wings, all started up after her, and the squirrels followed, leaving the glade bare.

Stig was not offended. He knew his friends had to be careful and trust no one. Rather he admired their wisdom. He stood up, threw down the last of the crumbs. "If only I were as careful in my affairs," he called to them, "I'd be a richer man." But he wasn't really serious. If the folk down in Clack took a little advantage of him, and cheated him in their weekly bartering, he didn't take it ill. He had enough food to eat, and wood for warmth. And if his clothes were a bit threadbare, what mattered that on the mountain with no one to see him? Not that their cheating amounted to much. On the whole, the townsfolk were kind to him. He'd gotten many a hand-me-down suit from friendly wives who'd sewn their husbands new ones. One wife had even given him an old patchwork quilt. (Patchwork quilts made from scraps of worn-out clothing were a special-

ty of the thrifty townswomen.)

Along with these kind gifts he'd also gotten a deal of advice that sometimes bordered on nagging. You should get married, the wives told him, just about every time he went down into the town. Have someone to keep you company, to cook for you and wash for you and keep your house clean. But for all the nagging, Stig knew he was safe enough, so safe he was even bold enough to challenge them.

"Who will wed me, then? Come on. Find a maid to go back up the mountain with me, to live as a woodcutter's wife!" Of course, they were unable to think of a soul who would leave the comfort and company of the town to share Stig's bare little hut up on the lonely mountainside.

And so, Stig would escape back home whistling and singing, so relieved and happy to be alone that he'd even made up a song about it, which he sang every day on the way home from his work.

High on Windy Mountain,
Stig lives a simple life;
He has but a bed,
A roof over his head,
And a hearth unencumbered by wife.

Whatever Stig felt, he told it in song, all the day long; whether he was alone in his hut, or out on the mountainside. Every fine day his rich warm voice would carry over the wind, and down in Clack they could hear him coming for miles.

And in the winter, when the snows came, smothering the mountain and shutting Stig indoors, he'd sit by his hearth, still singing away, making simple wooden carvings of his wild friends to trade down below. As he finished them, he'd place them against the walls of the hut until those walls were fairly crowded with squirrels, woodchucks, sparrows, blue jays, rabbits; and his night friends, raccoons and owls. And what wonderful carvings they were, especially the figures of the owls. There were screech owls, cat owls, marsh owls, and Stig's own favorite, his friend the old hoot owl who lived in the hollow tree across the clearing from his front door.

These he loved to make from good knotty branches, using the knobbls for the head, and the knots for the great, round eyes, into the center of which, when they were finished and polished, he set tiny black seeds that shone in the firelight.

Right now, however, it was late spring, a very mild and friendly late spring at that, and he had a heavy day's work to do chopping up an old oak felled by the last winter's storms.

He worked and worked away until the sun was down over the tops of the trees, and his body was crusted with the salt of his sweat. His belly began to rumble pleasantly. He began to think of a cold dip in the creek on his way home, of lighting the fire ready laid in his hearth to boil water for his tea, of the bread and cheese he'd eat for his supper while sitting on his doorstep—a real treat after being shut up in his hut for the long winter months. The cheese was a bit sweaty by now, even though he kept it in the root cellar, and the bread was a mite stale, but he didn't mind, for it was all that he was used to, living up there alone without the time to cook the fancy suppers that the townsfolk enjoyed every night.

His friend the hoot owl was just waking up and the first star was out as he dimbed the last slope to his hut, singing as ever, his favorite song:

High on Windy Mountain,
Stig lives a simple life;
He has but a bed,
A roof over his head,
And a hearth . . .

He stopped.

His hut door was open, and from it across the mild spring air were coming the most delicious smells of roasting meats and baking breads and herbs.

He walked the last steps, pushed back the door and went inside.