

*Magda's Lady*

'But are they real, Irena? Are they really real?'

'Of course they're real, silly. I've seen them myself.'

'And they're alive? You're sure they're alive?'

'I've already told you. You can see them walking about. You've got to be alive to do that, you know.'

'I know, I know. But *how* can a living person be that big?'

'Well, they just are.'

More than anything else Magda wanted to see the *Gegants*, the giant figures that were to parade the streets of Barcelona on the feast day. Irena had told her they were as tall as the house, dressed in beautiful, flowing robes – and Irena should know, for she was eight years old. That was twice Magda's own age. And Irena had said the *Gegants* were more than twice the size of a grown man.

Much, much more than twice, Irena had added. And her little sister had gazed up at the older girl's earnest face, and been filled with wonder.

Twice something, she knew, meant it was very, very

big. And more than twice . . . It was almost beyond comprehension. And how could anyone, even a giant, be that big?

For days she thought of nothing else. Their parents had promised to take them to Barcelona that Sunday to see the *Gegants*. Irena was excited too, but not only about the *Gegants*. She had seen it all the previous year, and remembered the stalls, the noise, the crowds, the bands, the people dancing the sardana in front of the cathedral. She spoke of all this to her little sister, but nothing seemed to make an impression on Magda beyond the *Gegants*.

Among the endless questions she asked her sister and her parents there was one she always kept back – the really important one. Were the *Gegants* good? For suppose they weren't good – suppose they were wild and wicked, and chased you and hit you, and trampled you under their enormous feet?

Sometimes she was so overwhelmed by her fear of these monster figures that she wanted to ask her parents not to take her to Barcelona on that day. But she was afraid to admit her fear. And, besides, she was fascinated by these huge and wonderful beings. How could she renounce seeing them?

It was hot and dark and airless, standing in the crowd, with grown-ups packed closely all around her. All she could see was legs – some in skirts, some in trousers – and a number of handbags, one of which swung into her face.

*'Papa! papa! I can't see. I can't see the Gegants!'*

*'They're not here yet. I'll pick you up as soon as they appear,'* her father reassured her.

They were standing in one of the narrow streets in the

Gothic quarter of the city, near the ancient Church of the Pine Tree. The crowds were pressed against the tall buildings to leave a space in the centre for the expected procession.

*'Ara! Ara vénen!'*

As the cry rang through the crowd Magda's father bent down and put his arms round her.

'Here they come,' he said. 'Up with you!'

Magda felt herself being raised, floating up, into a world of joy and excitement, tinged with a slight frisson of fear. For what if they were wicked after all, these huge and wonderful creatures?

Further along, she could see a giant figure advancing slowly and majestically. Behind it she made out another, and then yet another.

'Three!' she exclaimed.

Irena had told her there were only two. In her mind she settled it that this third giant was there specially for her, her own *Gegant*. Of course, if they weren't good after all, these enormous beings, perhaps she didn't really want one of her own.

As the first figure came near enough for her to make out the features her fear disappeared immediately. She had never seen anything so beautiful, so calm and stately as the face that was approaching, gazing impassively ahead. The figure was dressed in long, flowing robes of a soft, purple material.

Longer than curtains, thought Magda, as she watched the skirts almost sweeping the ground. Then she lifted her gaze again to the figure's head, and realized that a golden crown sat on the dark hair.

A queen!

Magda's awe was boundless.

Slow as was the advance of the giant figures, the first one passed too soon for the delighted Magda. But a moment later the second one had come up. Instead of a crown this one wore a silver diadem studded with jewels. The dress was of a shiny material in bright greens and yellows. The effect was dazzling. This figure too had a calm and beautiful face, and moved past with the same graceful, flowing movement of her long skirts.

And now my one, thought Magda, straining to see every detail of the final figure.

And this one, oh, this was the loveliest of them all! The long, rich folds of her silky skirt were of a soft, dove grey; her bodice was a warm, glowing pink; in one hand she carried a lace fan; and her face was even more beautiful than the other two, for there was a soft, almost tender expression on the perfect features.

Magda was enraptured. This was the best, the loveliest of the three, and she was *her* lady. For she no longer thought of them as giants, but as ladies, one of them no less than a queen.

Like the previous figures, this one turned occasionally towards the watching crowd on either side, with a slight inclination. And little Magda, perched high on her father's shoulder, received one of these acknowledgements.

From that moment she knew she belonged to her lady, fully, freely, for ever.

As soon as the figure had passed, her father put Magda down, with the words:

'You're getting to be quite a weight now, Magda.'

The child was filled with desolation. So that was it! Her idol had passed, she wouldn't see her again.

She was about to burst into tears when a daring idea came to her. At that moment neither parent held her by the hand. She was free! Without a second's hesitation she darted into the crowd and began making her way through it, in the direction of the departed *Gegants*.

It didn't take her long to catch up with the soft grey cloud of her idol's skirt. She ran right up to it, picked it up by the hem, and slipped inside.

At first she could hardly see, in the dim, grey light of the moving tent. She was surrounded by soft folds of grey, flowing gently along. I'm in a cloud, she thought, I'm in a cloud and the cloud is my lady, and I'm part of it too.

She was floating along, hearing the crowd all round her, but not part of it. She was part of the soft grey cloud which was her lady. The thought made her feel immensely privileged.

After she had got used to the half-light she looked about her to see the feet of her idol, and was puzzled to see only two long poles moving forward, one after another. Looking up she could make out nothing, as the darkness increased higher up.

For a moment she was disconcerted. Where, then, were her lady's feet?

A voice in the crowd started singing, and this distracted her. Other voices joined in, and soon the whole crowd was singing:

*Els gegants de Pi  
ara passen, ara passen.  
Els gegants del Pi  
ara passen pel camí.*

## MAGDA'S LADY

Magda recognized the old song, which generations of children had sung before her. Taking courage from her sheltered solitude, she joined in:

*Els gegants de la Ciutat  
ara ballen, ara ballen.  
Els gegants de la ciutat  
ara ballen pel terrat.*

The song had always conjured up a vague vision of the *Gegants* from the Church of the Pine Tree walking through the streets, while the *Gegants* from the City danced on the roof. Now she knew what it was all about. The *Gegants del Pi* were, at this very moment, walking through the streets, and she was walking with them, she was one of them – or, at least, she decided, thinking of her own small form, she was one of their chosen followers.

Gradually the singing began to die out, and another sound replaced it. Voices were calling out:

‘Magda! Nena! *On és la Magda?*’

More and more voices were calling her name, and they were the voices of strangers. Further back in the crowd she could hear a woman crying hysterically.

And still the torrent of strange voices, all calling her name:

‘Magda! Magda!’

She was filled with terror. What did all these strangers want of her? What were they going to do to her?

Would her lady not help her, protect her? In her fear she clasped one of the poles that were walking along

beside her. There was a sudden jerk, and then, as the two poles staggered about drunkenly for a moment, a man's voice a long way above her, letting out a stream of guttural oaths.

'My lady!' she cried, terrified. 'My lady!' She grabbed an armful of the soft grey material, trying to wrap herself up in the cloud.

Just then unknown hands unwrapped her, and a strange man picked her up and held her high in the air.

*'Es aquí! Es aquí la nena!'*

A moment later, just as she had begun to scream in terror, her father appeared and took her in his arms. Behind him came her mother, with tears streaming down her face.

People were shouting, laughing, enjoying the joke.

Fancy hiding under the skirts of one of the *Gegants!*

What an idea!

'I'd give her a good hiding, that'll teach her not to run away from her parents.'

Magda, in spite of her relief at being rescued from the crowd and handed over to her parents, was crying bitterly.

'My lady!' she sobbed, 'My lady!' That a being so gracious, so wonderful and magical, could turn into two long poles and a handful of grey cloth?

They didn't know what she was talking about, and she was never able to explain her heartbreak.