

# CORN CRAKE

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NESTING IN THE OAK OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE



# A Modern Blessing

As inspired by traditional Irish and Scottish blessings

*MILES MACNAUGHTON*

May the sunrise always warm your bed  
Through shadowed slats of lovely blinds,  
And may you be drawn gently into the day  
Without any trouble at all.

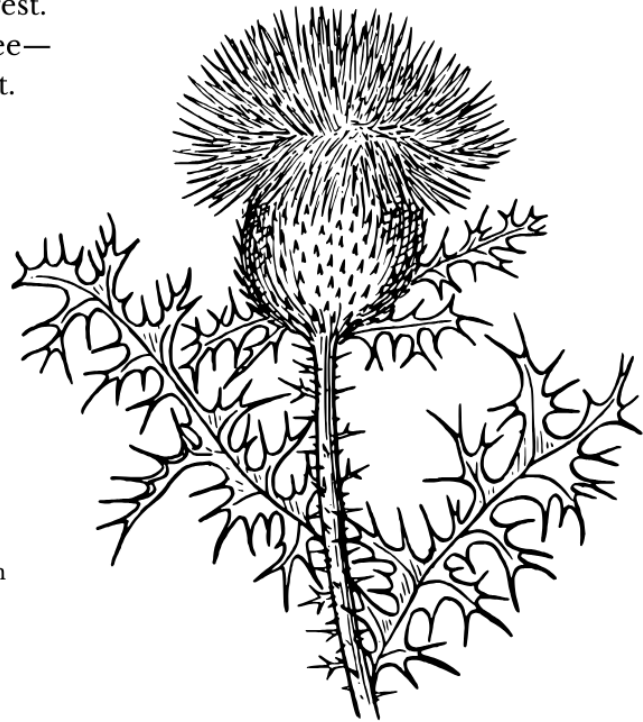
May your nights be calm and serene;  
May the purple dark bring you peace,  
And in whatever place you lay down your roots,  
May the hearth burn hot and bright.

May faith, hope, charity, and love  
All be saved for you in a locket,  
And may it open wide on days  
When its light is sorely needed.

When you travel, may you go without care;  
Let no hassles nip at your heels.  
Let all your adventures build memories  
To be forever nestled within.

When it is time to move on,  
May you never raise a glass of farewell whiskey;  
May your cup fill until it runs over  
With friendship, goodwill, and love.

May you always have someone to hold your hand;  
May you never want for joy or for rest.  
Wherever you go, be happy, live free—  
And in all things, I wish you the best.





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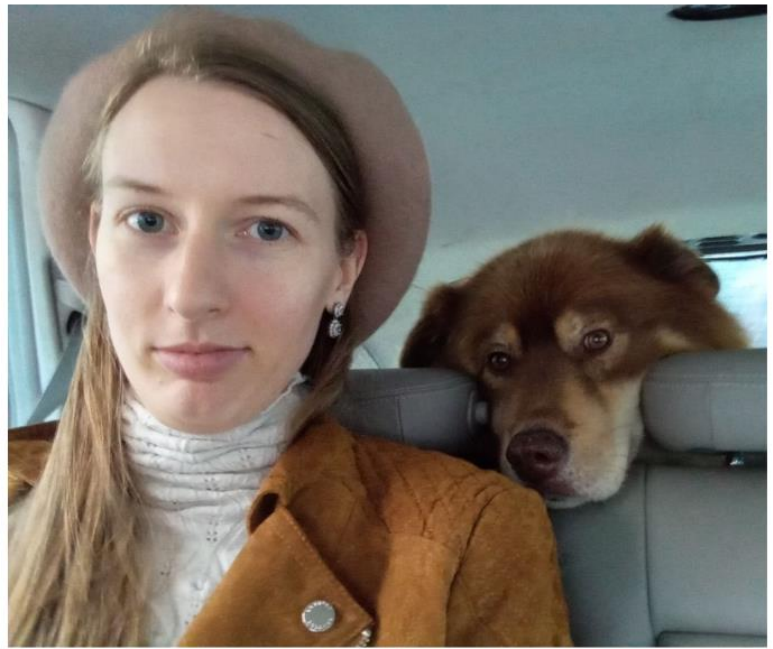
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*Sirens tore the skies.  
In the blackout,  
a little boy  
Finally saw stars.*

*Stars  
by William Riverdale*

# Editor's Note



And yet another issue is before us! How wonderful. This issue is packed with stories from many talented writers. If you like their work, consider checking out their Substacks, you can find the names on the title pages.

We begin with *A Modern Blessing*, in the style of the celtic versions by Miles McNaughton. The first story is the second part of ND Wallace Swan's epic, this time the story of *Frithogar Brandorsson*. Then AR Duncan joins us for the second time with a dragon-themed story, *Grawk's Deadliest Foe*. Philip Wortmann is back again also, with an Arthurian slant in *A Loveless Lay*, and the Brothers Krynn join us for the first time with *Tales of Roma: the Beast of Tarentium*.

*Thrown Away* is a heartbreaking story from the pen of renowned author Rudyard Kipling, but S. Baring-Gould's *The Demon of Spreyton* lightens the mood. My own *Druid Without a Home* progresses with Degore and Clancy's coming-of-age adventure, and we end with the tragic love story of Hellalyle and Hildebrand.

I am happy to announce that LR Scott, who runs the Substack Gibberish, will be providing a short story regularly in each mag, beginning this month with *The Fire*.

Happy reading, and remember the amnesiacs, because they can't.

**Call of the Shieldmaiden**  
Editor-in-Chief



# Frithogar Brandorsson

Part 2

ND Wallace Swan



**The vessel beckoned the foamy sea** as the hull split the waters, opening the dark void which always called for the souls of acutely aware sailors. The wind screamed their names as it lunged the ship forth along the salty deep. The dim lights on the shore ahead called like muted sirens, as the whirling greedily swallowed up screams while churning winds muffled all. Gesture was the lingua franca. Prooti, who was at the bow of the ship, pointed towards the lights while looking towards Chief Frithogar at the stern, who raised his hand to acknowledge him. Spring was a great time to sail, but night's darkness was always dangerous. Despite the deafening torrent, a rhythmic ballad played in the mind of Frithogar, as he led his entourage,

*“Flame, fire, homebound desire,  
The Geats, Goths, in Gutnish conspire,  
To Greece and Rome,  
Under sky and dome,  
Bringeth thy golden throne home.”*

There was, of course, more to it than that, but those lines repeated as he focused his concentration on the shore lights. The crew put away the sail and deployed the oars. Ordered strokes guided the vessel to the beach and they made landfall. Frithogar and his companions were greeted by Kungeata, Chieftain of Eketorps Borg on the island of Öland.

The ship was secured to landing stakes and two men were left to guard it. Frithogar and the remainder of his party were led by Kungeata to the great stone fortress of Öland, Eketorps. Its great stacked flat stone walls formed a ring of protection around the market village within. From its high walls, approaching enemies had no cover and were easily detected. Approaching friends were greeted even before landing as they too could be seen from far off. There they were greeted by friends, namely Kungeata's daughter Alva-Geata. In the previous years, Frithogar's mother and Grandfather had found her to be a good match for him, and so made efforts to impress the Öland clan.

“King Frithogar, I present my daughter Alva-Geata, Seaborn.”

Alva-Geata “The Seaborn” came forth from behind the doorway of the shelter just up from the landing dressed in a white gown. Tall and slender, with plentiful bosom, she was strong and had a healthy pink glow. Her flowing brown hair came down to her waist, contrasting with her bright blue eyes. She was eighteen, two years his junior, and born at sea. Her blue eyes were thought to come from this auspicious birth, between Öland and the mainland. Her mother Thorhilda's parents were from the inland village Thorshus, where Thorhilda and Kungeata were headed when a storm delayed and caused Alva-Geata's unexpected birth. One Ewe and Ram were

sacrificed after landfall in honour of the God Njörðr, before the family headed inland to Alva-Geata's Grandfather's Hold. Frithogar's countenance changed to awe in the presence of her renowned beauty.

“Hails Alva-Geata, I bring you fine wine from Magna Grecia Massalia, here...” He and his men handed over forty-eight plain clay flasks to the Chieftain's greeting party.

The Imperial wine was difficult to come by. It was impossible to get into the Northlands lest you were powerful or ...creative.

They then made their way inland toward the Eketorps fortress, a massive fortified circle of stacked rectangular flatstone. There was a gatehouse at one end with strong oak doors, large enough for a horse and cart to pass. Small banners bearing the symbols of Kungeata's House flew in the flickering torches which stood on the walls next to the many crenelations which circled the fortress. The walls were guarded and men would take their turns walking the top, eyeing the landscape for intrusion or danger. Within the walls, there were a few dozen homes with thatched roofs. Some were barns or stores for food. In the centre was the Great Hall where the chieftain's family stayed, feasts were held, ceremonies performed, and guests hosted. The rear of the fortress had an entrance about half the size of the main gate, but none of the pomp and ceremony. To the east was the Offerdamm, a sort of simple circular ring surrounding a small pungent swampy pond which contained reeds, with wooden walkways leading from a small doorway into the fortress to a small dock in the middle where animals were sacrificed to please the Gods. It was accessed from within the fortress, though with great difficulty one could wade in from outside. The ground surrounding most of the fortress was swampy. However, where it was dry it was rocky and completely devoid of natural cover which made its location tactically advantageous. There were small outdoor enclosures for fowl near the main gate, as well as a weaponsmith.

Frithogar and his party were brought to the main hall where they were to be fed as per guest right. Kungeata brought them inside and had them seated at a long table. A pig roasted whole hung in the centre, along with pickled squid, barley porridge, and lingonberry sauce. The pig glistened, basting in its own drippings, and seemed to squeal as they picked the flesh from its carcass. A hum of conversation filled the air, the different tribes speaking to each other in varied dialects, laughing about misunderstandings in terms and being careful to over-clarify in order to not insult or confuse. During a conversation with priest Runohurska, Frithogar was told that Alva-Geata's cousin Finnhrjolf had come of age and later overheard him convincing Frithogar's bannerman Prooti to bring him to Gotland.

“Young Gothi,” said Frithogar. “If your uncle will send you along with food, I will take you with me, but you must bring your own gear, we have no spares.”

Finnhrjolf nodded at the gregarious warrior and went off to confer with his uncle. The presumed heir to Eketorps soon returned with a cheery grin. Frithogar stood up and nearly fell over but Prooti caught him and kept him upright.

“Oh, where did you come from? I nearly fell into you Prooti.” Frithogar played it off and pretended he was embracing him. Everyone at the banquet turned in anticipation of some words from the High Chieftain. He went to raise a toast, and suddenly a guard burst into the hall.

“Arm yourselves! We are under attack from the main Gate! An enemy approaches the grand concourse!”

A dozen drunken men in the hall ran for their gear and prepared for the worst. Frithogar asked Prooti for a sobering slap to the face and was obliged, waking him significantly. He shook it off and, still drunk, ran to the walls. A number of men are preparing to hold fast to the main gate. Kungeata peers over the battlement, and sees a group of several dozen warriors, leading two chained brown bears.

He bellows, “Hails! Who hath wandered to my keep in the night, O Stranger?”

The warriors are silent. They carry a banner, featuring a Sanguine Bear Rampant on a field Azure. The bears growl and groan beneath their muzzles. The wind seemed to still, before one warrior, much taller than the unruly crew, stepped forward. The flickering torchlight revealed a man in a hooded brown cloak. He lowered his hood and unveiled his pale scarred face. He had no beard or hair of any kind, not even eyebrows, which was very strange for Saxons or Geats. Raising his hands in the air, he chanted in a foreign tongue, which neither Kungeata nor Frithogar understood.

“What is this!?” yelled Kungeata. But the chanting became louder, and soon the unknown warriors joined in.

The chorus rang throughout the fortress, and the ground began to tremble.

“*Ek em Brattor.*” The strange man suddenly bellowed amid the mass chant.

The front gate blew open as if a great wind was focused on that point. The poor men behind could not withstand its force and were sent flying backwards into the fortress beyond the gatehouse, many knocked unconscious, though the ones who were still awake lay there groaning. Kungeata rallied his men towards the gate entrance, abandoning the walls.

“HOLD!” He screamed, awaiting the strange force. But only the tall pale-faced man appeared, and the bears, pulling at their braces, wild for blood. He waved his hands outwards and to the sides, causing the men in his way to be pushed aside as if by invisible extensions of his

hands. The men were frozen in place, ready to attack, but not a muscle could they move. They watched as the strange man walked with the bears towards the Offerdamm. The bears seemed to stand guard, now untethered. The man approached the offering platform. Raising his hands in the air once more towards the sky, he shouted, “*Meelohm Tor cyfodi nawr!*”

A great stirring began beneath the swampy Offerdamm, and a great stench of rot and mildew filled the air; hundreds of skeletal animals of all sorts began to march into Eketorps Borg: rabbits, fowl, deer, horses, pigs, all as if they were alive. The strange man seemed to lead them back to the gateway, silently, nothing made a stir! His bears in front towards the gateway he turned to Kungeata and told him in some unknown tongue,

“*Deeolch. Ek em Brattor. Wheel far.*”

It seemed absolute gibberish, partially common tongue but something else as well. As the gates closed, the men regained their mobility and Kungeata ran for the top of the walls. There he could see the line of skeletal animals marching silently northwards, following the pale man. None of the earlier warriors from before could be seen. The doors were soon reinforced with extra beams and large barrels filled with stones were put into the entryway to slow anyone down if the enemy returned. The fortress remained on high alert until morning. Besides some of the men injured when the door was blown open, and the splintered cubit-thick drawbar was snapped, there was little evidence of anything having happened the previous night. But the memory remained and even grown men shivered in their beds at the thought.

Kungeata didn't sleep, he was so disturbed by what he had seen. He gathered the elders, along with Frithogar and his trusted man Prooti in his private dwelling the next morning to discuss the previous night's events.

“Gothi, you know why you are here. Do any of you know if last night carried any known significance with things in your past? First of all the man spoke some common tongue. “*Ek er Brattor*”? Is this just his name? “I am Brattor?” Seems simple enough. But what does it mean? He walked into my fortress as if it were nothing. My...our men were frozen stiff as if turned to stone when we tried to physically oppose him. He forced the door with his words! His words! The beam on the door can't be made from Öland lumber! It's far too thick! I will have to order lumber from Möre! That gate stop held for my entire life, I don't know when it was installed. Then again maybe it was rotten or something, how else could it burst? I don't know. And the Offerdamm? Do any of you have any ideas?”

“I have heard of men like this.” said elder Per Persson, an older former sailor who now served as an advisor to Kungeata in his late age. “My father sailed far away. He knew of strange people. In the East, there is a pale race,

with hair so fair it was white or clear even in youth. They run with the reindeer and follow them. Some say they are magical but my father just thought they were skraelings. There is also in the West a different sort, they wore cloaks and held ceremonies in sacred groves, and they had magic, light and dark magic. The Empire hunted and killed many of them. I don't know if any survived. Perhaps this man was one..."

Some of the other elders nodded along with Per's story but most had little to offer.

"But what of the animal bones? That came alive without flesh? They followed him! Many of us saw it, it was no illusion! I thought I was going mad!" said the junior local priest Arnid. "...what of the sacrifice? Will the Gods be angered that these bones were stolen? That we were too weak to stop them? I have never witnessed such magic before in all my time. The magic was as dark as the man was pale. I am just..."

Gerta, the head priest who was also present, gave Arnid a good slap across his face, silencing him.

"Arnid, do shut up." said Gerta. Arnid did shut up. He left the hall and went back to his work tending to the fowl-pen.

"Imbecile though he be, pain solves for many stupids. We shall not worry, for if the Gods see fit to punish us, then we shall be punished."

Prooti leaned against the grey stone wall of the fortress as the discussion continued. He turned to look at the wall and marvelled at how tightly the stones were stacked. He could not slide his knife blade between the stones, which he tested in several places out of curiosity. A woman approached him.

"You will find no meat there, sir," said the slender blonde woman, wearing frumpy woollen garments, green and grey alternating cloth with a sable finish on the frills. Her hair from the centre of the top of her head down was braided into a large ornate pattern; a complex lattice including strands of some sort of reddened string...probably wool soaked in dyes but Prooti was no expert. Along the strings were strung wilting yellow buttercup flowers which Prooti found quite alluring. He stood there rather dumbfounded, tired from the previous night's events and having been caught off guard by the woman.

"Speak, mute! Or are you mute?" She said scornfully, yet in a strangely playful manner. "All the better, I say. Silver-tongued devils are far too common. Now just look at you! You are an absolute beggar of filth, aren't you? I say come with me and I will wash you. Quite frankly I find your current presentation disrespectful," she said, with a sort of crazed look.

Prooti, taken aback, opened his mouth to speak and suddenly the woman was on him with a kiss and embracing the very much surprised Prooti, who dropped his knife on the ground behind him. No one else seemed to

notice this but Prooti was quite happy that no one was stopping it.

Frithogar spoke, "We will remain here under your host, Kungeata, for three more nights. If nothing happens we will continue our travels to Gotland. I can bring your Sistersson heir, still, if you wish. It may be a good experience for him."

The blonde woman released Prooti for a moment, looked at him with a big smile and grabbed his hand quite hard, yanking him towards her as she led him towards one of the houses. Prooti wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth and so put up a false resistance, shrugging towards Frithogar as he was passing.

"I am going to wash you, you filthy man!" said the woman as she approached the doorway. As she dragged him in, Prooti gave one final look and shrug to Frithogar, and off he went into the abode.

It was dark in the house but there was a small fire in the middle, with a pot of water over it. There was a trough on one side of the single-roomed home. Prooti appeared quite swarthy, but the woman was determined to reveal his true complexion.

"Okay you must get off those clothes, I will clean them. Don't worry you can wear this after..." She tossed a clean brown tunic towards Prooti, who snatched them nervously.

"Okay so take it off and get in the trough."

Prooti was soon completely nude. A rather burly man who had seen his fair share of violence in his young life. He sat down in the cold water of the trough and he winced as his manhood shrunk down to suit the temperature. He was a little embarrassed.

"Don't worry it is nothing I haven't seen before," said the woman. "You men are all the same. Filthy, with dangly bits and such. Don't think you are so special. Now hold still."

The woman had some oils which she rubbed into some fabric. Prooti noticed the smell.

"What smell is this?" he asked. The woman didn't answer and just started rubbing the oil-soaked cloth on his back. She scrubbed a pattern of the Thorn Rune onto his back, laughing as she did so.

"Why are you laughing?" asked Prooti, confused.

"It is nothing," she said, "You are just so damn dirty."

This calmed Prooti but he was a bit concerned over this whole affair. Was this really about the washing? She did kiss him right on the mouth.

The woman then completed a combination Rune onto his back, combining the Thorn, Rad, and Odal Runes. It was a symbolic spellbinding meaning: "Thor's Riding Possession" (roughly speaking. She paused for a moment, soaking in the significance of her magical enchantment. Then she finished washing him, leaving no stone unturned but doing so rather mechanically.



“There you are, clean. However I have not told you my name, I am Thora. But I must also tell you that I have done to you a binding spell and now you must claim me,” she said with crazed eyes, like knives into the mind of Prooti. He was shaken.

“What did you do?” he asked. He didn’t have a lot of dealings with women, generally speaking, never mind the ones that wash you for no reason.

“I marked your back with runes,” she said. Suddenly Prooti understood. He didn’t know much but he knew that women carried powerful magic, powers to curse even strong men, making their lives a living, breathing hell of no relent if he didn’t do what he was asked.

“Now that I have washed you, I am your possession and you are mine! Are you excited? It is sealed!” said Thora, “Now, get dressed. The wedding is tonight!”

Prooti wondered if he was being tricked, like last night with the strange “foreigner”. He dressed himself, Thora ran off with his dirty clothes towards a soaking tub outside near where the house backed onto the wall of the fortress. Prooti followed her, and as he exited the door he was confronted by a man.

“Halt!” said the man. “What were you doing with my daughter in the washing shed?”

Prooti replied, “Oh I was...she was...I...am a very dirty man.”

The man slapped Prooti across the face. Prooti thought about his words carefully going forward.

“What I mean is...I am...I was...covered in soot, dirt, filth, sweat...I needed washing!”

The man calmed. “Oh. What was my daughter Thora doing in there with you?”

“She was washing me with oils in the trough and she said I was dirty and needed to...”

“...be cleaned?” finished the man. “This was how her mother got me...I used to be an adventurer like you, but then...I feared a woman’s magic more than anything else.”

Frithogar ran up to the discussion, wondering what had happened.

“Prooti, is that you? Your skin is...so fair...did you have a bath? And why is this man slapping you?”

“I...she...the woman washed me, she said I was a dirty man and that I needed to be made clean.”

“But my friend, on Oland if a woman washes you, in the presence of no other, that is the marriage bond. You are now House-Bound to her. She is your wife now.”

“But it is even WORSE! She possession-cursed me Frithogar! She bound herself to me in runes! I did not understand at first why she was laughing!”

“My friend, you have no choice now. You are House-Bounded. If you break it, your House is cursed forever. It is okay. We will simply bring her along to Gotland. But she is your responsibility.”

Thora’s father, Sigmund Thorsson, waited with Frithogar and Prooti until Thora returned from some bragging to her neighbour. They got to know each other a little better and Prooti was somewhat relieved that his unforeseen in-laws were good people, despite the slap. With only days until they left, a marriage ceremony was quickly organized for that evening. Thora took her vow to Thor while Prooti took his to Freyja. Their hands were symbolically bound together with hemp and there was a small feast. Things were somewhat rushed as the party needed to get ready to leave in only two days. All that remained was the bedding.

“TO THE CHAMBERS!” Yelled one man, probably Thora’s cousin, but Prooti was too drunk to tell. The couple soon had the crowded hall gathered around them, lifting each of them over their heads as they made their way to the bedding. Thora and Prooti screamed with laughter but were obviously quite nervous given the situation. The crowd deposited them into their bed chamber and gathered around to watch the events. None would leave until the deed was done, providing the final approval of the Gods as the two clamoured in their drunkenness upon the fur-lined shallow open platform in full view of the gathered family and friends, deep into their cups they counted the moments much to the embarrassment of the newlywed couple, who finally, after some awkwardness at the publicity of it all, finally succumbed to nature’s finale in a much-anticipated completion and so it was all over and the crowd finally left them alone. Soon they fell asleep.

Back at the hall, Frithogar continued his earlier conversation with Kungeata. His vision was doubling and he swayed back and forth in his seat as Kungeata picked at his tunic.

“I do not know,” Kungeata said

“You do not know what?” Frithogar replied.

“Bones, walking out the door. I simply do not know what to think of this. I am at a complete loss of thought. It is as if I have no words or explanation. I am a mute on it. I...I...” Kungeata vomited on the floor, nearly hitting Frithogar’s feet.

“The food has arrived late.” he jokes.

“I’m sorry, I... must be sick,” mutters Kungeata, his beard slightly dripping in vomit.

“It appears so.” Frithogar reacts, waving a hand towards servants for assistance.

A man named Joop rushes over to help Kungeata and hands him some linens. A servant girl arrives soon after and cleans up the vomit, washing the floor with a rag and a shallow bowl of water.

“Perhaps you should rest, friend,” says Frithogar. “We can talk more when we are in better spirits tomorrow.” By ‘we,’ he really meant Kungeata.

Kungeata nods and is escorted to his chamber by Joop, Thorhilda greets them at the doorway and helps her

husband to bed, bidding Joop good night. Frithogar stands up. As tall as he is, he feels even taller now as the delirium of over-imbibing suddenly takes hold of his body. He looks at his feet and imagines himself Slepnir, the eight-legged horse of Odin.

"I feel as though I have wings and I am gliding above the Earth in this place. The gods they carry me..."

Frithogar's vision begins to darken, and close, and then he feels peace. Unfortunately, Frithogar fell like a tree in the forest, though everyone heard the loud THUMP as he splayed out on the floor of the great hall. Several Duty-men of the hall gathered around and after failing to wake him, worked together to pick him up and drag him to his quarters.

Frithogar is awakened by a loud shriek, he jumps out of his bed. His doorway is open, and in the entrance stands the strange pale man from days before. Frithogar opens his mouth, but words won't come out. A strange bleating, honking sound comes out instead. He looks at his hands and they are hooves. Has he been bewitched? A fog surrounds him as he is led out crawling, bleating away at the silent tall pale man.

"Unhand me at once!" Frithogar tries to say, but this is transformed into a screechy yelp. Frithogar tries to stand up, and he does for a moment but it is as though his legs do not work normally, and soon he is again crawling. He looks back towards his rear and sees his body. He is a Goat. Through the fog he is led towards the back corner of the fortress, feeling more and more anxious as he realizes where he is heading: The Offerdamm.

On the platform which rises above the swollen marsh, there are four hooded figures, cloaked in black, standing in stark contrast to the foggy greyness. Only his clapping and the pale man's shuffling can be heard. It is cold, but not freezing.

Soon they're on the offer platform and the four hooded figures start to make sounds. One screams like a woman in childbirth. The second utters like a man on his final breaths. The third moans like a dying animal. The fourth laughs like a madman. The sound freezes Frithogar in his place. The pale man lays Frithogar on his side and his hooves are bound together. First the front, then the rear legs, and then they are all bound together. The pale man then rises in the midst of the hooded figures and looks into the eyes of the hopelessly frozen Frithogar.

"FRITHOGAR!" Bellows the pale man, before rolling the goat off of the platform and into the marshy pool.

Frithogar plunges into the dark water and he can feel himself transforming. He uses his teeth to bite through his bonds as he sinks. Soon his hooves are freed, but he sees they've turned back into human hands and arms. His legs returned back to human form and soon he was no longer a goat. He continued to sink into the deep.

After a few moments of panic trying to muster up the energy and strength to return to the surface, he suddenly falls into a lush green forest, dry land. He takes a deep breath and is relieved. He is naked. Streaks of sunlight sneak through the veil of the forest's canopy, bringing a deep but gentle warmth to his body. A deer approaches him, confidently pushing through a tall shrub.

"Frithogar," said the deer. "*You seek what you cannot find. Forward you go, but backwards remind.*"

"Wh-who are you? What is this place? How are you talking?"

"*You know me as I know you. I am the wind when I breathe, the water as I drink, the earth as I eat, and the fire as I seek. The songs of dead men. The tears of their wives. The bronze of their weapons. The beating hearts within their chests. I am the one-eyed raven. I slew Ymir with Villi and Ve. By his blood came the rivers. His bones are the mountains. His hair the forests. Through his death, I became life, the Allfather. Through your offering, you have come to know, and in death, you have become as I.*"

"You are Odin?" Asked a shocked Frithogar.

"*I am many things to many people. I am man. I am legend. I am he who seeks. I am the hanged. I am Becrux. I am Polaris. I am he who came from Gardarrike, and he who came to Gotland, and I am especially the journey in between. I am everything, but I am nothing. What you remember, is what I will be forever.*"

"But Allfather, I did not willingly sacrifice myself for this knowledge. I was transformed into a Goat and thrown into an Offerdamm by a pale man. I have made no willing effort to come here."

"*You what? You descend here by fraud? What is the meaning of this? Unnatural order into the realm beyond! You have to go back! You must not remain or the balance will be broken above! What chaos this could bring! Perhaps Ymir could stir once more and rain upon us like Ragnorok! Warriors have not gathered yet and this escapade will be doomed! You must return, Frithogar!*"

Frithogar was confused at this, closing his eyes to blink, having felt dumbstruck at the experience.

"Frithogar! Frithogar!" He heard a voice.

"Frithogar, the day is late, it is time for midday maturity." Said Prooti, as Frithogar's blink finished. He got up from his platform. His feet were soaking wet.

"Why are my feet wet??" He asked Prooti.

"I was trying to wake you. You were a stone, sleeping."

Frithogar got up and put on his clothes. *Who undressed me?* he thought to himself. He and Prooti made their way to the hall where some food, dried fish, flatbread, and wild berries had been placed at tables and some others were seated around taking their fill. Thora was seated at a table, gossiping with Alva. While they ate, Frithogar told Prooti about his apparent, "dream", leaving out most details, but mentioning the pale man and the talking deer.

"I feel like you shouldn't have told me this." Said Prooti. "It feels like something I am not supposed to know. But let me tell you something, Thora is a powerful seeress. I am worried if I cross her she will curse me!"

"Well, she is your wife now." Frithogar chuckled, "If she did that where is she going to get it from? Hmm? You only have one of them."

"Don't laugh!" Prooti covered his lower half with his hand.

"Don't worry Prooti, we all know it works as intended."

"And what if it hadn't? Or doesn't?"

"Then you'd have to get a new one!"

Thora and Alva approached their table.

"When do you leave for Gotland?" Thora asked.

"Tomorrow, hopefully at first light." Replied Frithogar.

"I wish to come with you. I will bring provisions of course."

"Very well then. You may come."

Alva winked at Frithogar. "Frithogar, come with me."

Frithogar left with her out towards the gatehouse, leaving Thora and Prooti behind.

"I have never been to Gotland," Thora said. "Why are you going there anyway?"

"Frithogar has so decided, and so we go." Said Prooti.

"Why do you think he wants to go there?"

"He is seeking out the resting place of his ancestors. He believes it must be written in stones there. He wants to know."

"Well, I'm sure there is not much there but Geats. What should they have to do with a Saxon King?" Said Thora, seating herself onto Prooti's lap. She leans in as if to kiss him and instead plucks out one of his nose hairs.

"Ow! What was that for!?" Shouts Prooti.

"Oh my husband, you should know, and if you don't, then you need not know. It is better you don't know."

Thora then plucked a hair from her eyebrow and held the two hairs together, spinning them in between her fingertips. The dried mucous attached to Prooti's nose hair entwined itself with the hair from Thora's eyebrow and they were stuck together. She then put it into her mouth and swallowed it.

Prooti wonders what this crazy woman was doing.

"What is this about?" He asked.

"Oh nothing," she says out loud. She moves closer and whispers in his ear, "*Everything.*"

Meanwhile, inside the gatehouse, Frithogar and Alva are walking and talking.

"How long is the voyage to Gotland?" She asks.

"I do not know. I've never done it. I have directions but that is all. Weeks? A few months? I am uncertain. I hope it is not too far or the journey does not take long. I want to be home in Bierde by winter." Replies Frithogar.

"With me of course?" She says, winking knowingly.

"Certainly!"

After some more strolling about along the wall, they say goodnight to each other and Frithogar joins his crew and speaks about the journey the next morning. They prepare what they can that night and return to the fortress to sleep.

They awaken before the first light and pack up their final things, including Thora and her provisions like a small bag of strange items. Alva, Thorhilda, and Kungeata wake up early to see them off.

"May your journey be fruitful, and may you return home whole, and safe," Kungeata said to Frithogar and his crew.

"Hails!" Frithogar and his crew shout back, as they push off into the morning's sun. Oars out, they row out into the sea until they catch a decent wind. Soon they unfurl their sail and pull in the oars.

As Eketorps fades from view, they sail along the coastline of Öland, but soon disappear. The sky darkens behind them, blocking out the rays of the setting sun. The waves begin to lick upwards. They can see an island ahead.

"We'll head to that island and make camp." Shouts Frithogar over the deafening wind. "Get your oars out!"

*Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. Stroke.* They inched closer to the shore, the maddening wind pushing their small boat around in the feisty waves as if they were rowing up the river the headwind was so strong. Frithogar downs the sail, and so they make their way to the oasis upon the deep. A thick grey fog is rolling in behind the island, but soon they make landfall...



# Grawk's Deadliest

## Foe

A R Duncan



With one final hack the seventh head of the great dragon fell to the barbarian's axe. The cave that until very recently had been a dragon's lair, housed an ocean of blood that covered the floor and walls, its only living inhabitants, and most importantly for them, the treasure trove. The battle had lasted seven days and nights of grueling combat and was a tale that would be told for generations to come. The adventurers had gone through all the magical potions and alchemical healing herbs; their armour was torn and pierced; and each had taken grievous wounds and cuts. But now the treasure that lay without an owner was all theirs. But little did Grawk know that his deadliest foes still lay ahead of him.

Grawk wiped the blood from his great-axe and placed it on his back between the smouldering remains of his two prized animal pelts. A sense of pride flushed through him as he surveyed the grand foe the party had defeated. This sense of pride was followed by an even more overwhelming sense of joy as looked to the treasure that he could get his fair share of. Stepping around the dragon and avoiding the puddle of blood, Grawk made his way to the pile of gold and let out a great victory cry, letting his fellow party members, his friends, know that the battle was over.

A shout of glee came from behind a small boulder, followed by the blur that was the party's gold loving, halfling, Barry, as he streaked past Grawk, and dove headfirst into the pile of gold coins. He floundered around in delight, stuffing all the treasure he could into every available space he had. Gold coins in his pockets, precious gems stuffed into his shirt, and silver candlesticks down each leg.

'Stop it there Nimblefingers!' came a cry from the back of the cave, as from round a corner emerged the three remaining party members.

'Y-yeah, you better wait for us, you.. thief!' came a second cry, this one several levels of magnitude more timid than the first. The first stern cry had come from Ell'tho'r and the second from the apprehensive, bashful looking half-elf a few paces behind him.

'We got tae discuss this 'afore anyone starts filling their bags' came one final gruff voice, this time belonging to the dwarf, and final member of this motley crew, Thordren.

Looking dejected, Barry emptied his shirt and trousers of any loot he stuffed there, before grumpily kicking an ornate silver bowl to the edge of the pile and making his way back to the band of four heroes waiting at the end of the dragon's tail.

'And the pockets too Barry darling!' called Ell'tho'r in a haughty voice. Several large golden coins tumbled from out turned pockets as a sheepish halfling made his way to the waiting council.

'Now that we're all accounted for, I believe we must begin with a grand congratulations for us all. We have

each played our part magnificently, and each of us was instrumental in the felling of this foul beast...' and on and on he droned. Grawk did not like words, especially when so many were used when so few could do. But this elf was smarter than him and he was using very fancy words, which must mean it was very important.

"And of course who could forget the prodigious effort made by our friend..." The elf continued to waffle but Grawk did not wish to interrupt him. He had always wished that he had the sane intelligence and authority that the elf did, but he didn't, and he guessed that was just his lot in life. But then again, that would mean he was the one who had to use lots of words instead of chopping with his axe and he was happy with the current arrangement. The dwarf looked as bored as Grawk was, but still he didn't interrupt. Thordren was a man of formality and order. Grawk could see the pained expression on his face but knew full well that he would never consider stopping Ell'tho'r and upsetting the order of the party. In stark contrast was the half elf opposite, who stared adoringly upon the face of his idol, hanging on his every word and repeating back half sentences obediently. Ell'tho'r was already reaching crescendo number seven of his speech and had a strange glimmer in his eye, that if Grawk were a cynical man he may have taken to mean that Ell'tho'r was doing this deliberately to wind them all up. But Grawk was anything but cynical. He turned next to his halfling companion. But he was not there.

"Nimblefingers!" Roared the elf shaking the others from their slumber as he interrupted his speech mid-sentence. The party spun round to face the treasure pile and there, poking up from behind an enormous pile of gold, was the rear end of Barry Nimblefingers. He stood bolt upright and let out a particularly high-pitched squeal, as he clutched the pile of gold coins and chains to his chest. Before anyone else could move he bolted towards the cave's exit, screaming all the way.

"You little, snivelling, thieving wretch", growled Ell'tho'r, "Somebody get him!"

Grawk complied. He pulled an axe from his hip and deftly threw it at the tiny fleeing figure. It landed in between Barry's shoulders and his limp body continued to slide for a few extra feet. Gold coins tinkled away in all directions, as it came to a violent rest at the foot of a stalagmite.

"Now that the traitor in our midst has been dealt with, let us return to the matter at hand, dividing up our glorious spoils. Now Grawk for the most wonderful service you just rendered, I suggest you get to take your fill and then we'll divide up the rest between us. After all it was you who slayed the beast herself".

Grawk looked at his compatriots. He thought about what the elf had said but wasn't sure what to make of it. Yet the party leader had commanded it and after all he was the one who did most of the fighting, so maybe it

was fair. And he did like gold a great deal. Ell'tho'r smiled wryly at him as Kevbor nodded along enthusiastically, but Thordren was having none of it.

"Haud on a moment. That isnae right. We didnae agree on that. We're a team. We a' worked together to defeat the beast so we should a' get an even share. It's the only fair way".

Grawk paused and thought on what the dwarf had to say. Maybe he was right. It didn't feel very fair to Grawk and after all he had never been in it just for the money. He loved his party mates too much for that and he certainly didn't want to mistreat them.

"Do you hear that Grawk?" Retorted Ell'tho'r "He wants to deprive you of your hard-earned rewards. This dwarf stood back and let you do all the fighting, take all the danger. And now he wants the gold; your gold; whilst all he did was cower around the corner".

"No, no, no! I'm nae taking that. I wisnae cowering, I wis protecting the rear. And we've been a team for months now. What about the rest of this adventure. We've all played our part. Need I remind you about..."

Oh dear. Now Grawk couldn't made head nor tails of any of it. He was mightily confused and just wanted to be told what to do. The two argued back and forth and forth and back whilst Grawk awkwardly waited in the middle for a consensus to be reached. He really did wish his esteemed colleagues wouldn't argue like this. Why couldn't everyone just agree and then they could all get on with the important stuff.

"Are you even listening tae a' this? He's jist trying tae cause divisions. How can you nae see it? Are you even able tae fit anything in that thick skull of yours? You cannae understand anything can you, you stupid git?" Thordren directed his insults to the anxiously waiting Grawk.

"Do you hear that Grawk?" Thordren thinks you're a moron. That's not something a loyal party member would about another dear friend. I think we may have another betrayer in our midst, isn't that right Kevbor".

"Y-yes sir. Absolutely. H-he's a traitor alright", came the weak echo of his master from Kevbor.

"I am maist certainly nae traitor, but if you cannae work oot what's going on here, then I am maist certainly calling a moron, you useless eejit. Can you nae see he'd trying tae..."

The dwarf's final statement, half rant half plea, was cut short. As was he. The great-axe on Grawk's back sliced through the air in record pace and Thordren's head bounced to the floor with a clang and squelch.

"As always, another marvellous job Grawk. Another Judas dealt with, although I fear we may have one more to deal with..." Spoke Ell'tho'r as he turned towards Kevbor menacingly.

"Yeah great job Grawk. And yeah, I totally agree that there's still one of those snakes left. Just like you said master".

"Do you hear what he just said Grawk? He thinks you might be a backstabber. Another rat".

The accusation was accompanied with a particularly malicious elven smile. The kind that only centuries of tireless practice can perfect. Any observer, even Grawk, could see Kevbor's whole thought process as the wheels turned and the toady half-elf realised exactly what he had just implied.

"No. Wait! Y-you're definitely not a t-traitor. That's not what I meant", he cried in wide eyed panic.

"Well what did you mean then? Who is the traitor then Kevbor? Surely you don't mean it's me. Maybe he means himself... What do you think Grawk?"

Grawk didn't know that to think. This was all just a bit much for him. So much betrayal from so many he'd thought himself close to. If only he still had his gem of truth telling he could work this all out in just a few moments. Grawk had never been onto the pickup on delicate social cues so that gem was a life saver, but much to his displeasure he had misplaced it a few days ago.

"Oh goodness. What's this?" Cried Ell'tho'r as he plucked a small pouch from he devotee's waist. Kevbor froze in panic and his already wide eyey grew larger still until they were wider than any of set of eyes had even been.

"My, my, my. Would you look at this Grawk" Ell'tho'r peeled back the leather pouch and revealed a perfectly clear and sparkling green gem, "This appears to be a gem of truth telling, how bizarre. But didn't you lose one just like this Grawk? Two nights ago, right? It looks like another of the conspirators has revealed himself, wouldn't you agree".

Kevbor began a floundering protest in sheer terror, but Grawk had seen and heard enough.

"I-it's not what it looks like! He told me to!" He turned to face his master in shock, "You said we were going to..."

Grawk's knife pierced Kevbor's face with such force that not only did the knife come out the back but so did Grawk's viscera covered fist. Grawk hated thieves. Thieves and traitors. His two most hated foes. And dragons too. And he had faced all three in one day.

"Marvellous Grawk. Simply marvellous" crooned Ell'tho'r with glee. His plan was nearly at fruition. "Now just start taking your choice of the treasure. You've done such a wonderful job that I'll just wait back here and let you have first pick. I'll leave it in your very capable hands to decide what to leave behind for me. I wholly trust your judgement".

Grawk stepped past the newly added corpses of his former comrades to the edge of the pile of treasure. Under the decaying gaze of the treasure's previous owner he surveyed it all basking in its glittering majesty. There was so much here he simply could not even begin to work out where to start. All this for only two people. It seemed preposterous.

He knelt down and found the polished silver bowl that had been discarded so carelessly several lifetimes ago. The silver had such a shine that Grawk could see his own reflection perfectly. His bloodied face was never pretty at the best of times but he gave himself a toothy grin to make sure he still had all his teeth and was pleasantly surprised with the result. Still admiring his reflection, he stood up and caught a glimpse of some something truly horrifying behind him. There in the reflection, just over Grawk's shoulder, was Ell'tho'r, his face twisted into a grotesque sneer. In his hands he held his staff of power and at its end was a crackling blue bolt of magic which was aimed directly at Grawk's back. Oh dear. It was happening again.

In an instant Grawk span round and loosed the bowl from his hand. In less than a heartbeat it found its mark at Ell'tho'r's neck. It struck the point between head and chest and ripped the two in twain. The body slumped to the floor with a wet flop and the staff of power rolled to one side, harmlessly releasing its charge into the side of the draconic corpse.

Grawk took his pick of the pile, gathered his weapons, including the bowl, and left the blood-soaked cave. Grawk embarked on many more adventures and performed many superhuman acts of great heroism. But to tell these stories is not the aim of this extravagant writer and shall be left to men far more humble than I. Because never again, did he face such a deadly foe.



# A Loveless Lay

Philip Wortmann





Low  
it whistled  
in his ear,  
He who sat there  
in the crag.  
Long his face,  
As though a wooden carving of the Lord,  
With tumbling beard awild in the weather.  
And over long and freshly oiled hair,  
As written is within the scripture sacred,  
Did Arthur mourn his loss of love,  
For in this moment he felt only hatred.

Upon the moss-cloaked mount  
Not far from hence,  
There stood the spires of Camelot  
— A place where once about the Table Round  
Good friends had feasted heartily;  
But now the merry sounds were drowned.  
The Castle's honour was beset by rot.

“Oh, Lancelot! Oh, Lancelot!  
How I do loveless lust  
With fire in breast to slay thee!  
Oh, Lancelot, in Camelot  
Wast thou not he who should replace me  
Were I to fall in battle's dread?  
Then you should have taken up my stead.  
But now I sit and do not weep,  
For even what of mercy tender I did keep  
You broke and callous made with loveless lust,  
By making of my home thine own,  
Yet ere my passing from this coil!  
And now, without what appetite  
My joys once bathed in,  
I toil and sigh  
— A king without his people's love.  
I am become a mockery.”

Thus spoke the king alone and free  
From courtly lies and porc'lain faces.  
And when the bloody sun was soon to set,  
And cast his vicious arrows at the heads  
Of those proud mountains not afar;  
All painting clouds like warriors' scars,  
King Arthur rose and took his branding Caliburn  
— The blade that rent through stone  
And steel with but a turn  
Of that dour lordling's mighty wrist.  
But not yet would King Arthur go  
Toward that once so welcome glow,  
To Camelot,  
Where now yet glistened coal well wasted;

Where Guinevere like witches should have burned,  
Yet now with careless lordling of the Lake,  
She pranced in flow'ring fields of horse's wake.  
Not yet would Arthur venture to that tomb  
— A stone so cold, the home of gloom.

No, Arthur would go outward more  
— Would press into the whistle low  
That issued from this hillock's mason crown,  
Which he had set himself to climb  
After his heart had been rent from his middle  
And now was carried far on leathern saddle,  
Holding fast in both her arms  
Her slaver and her savour  
For but a little while.

And all the while silent Arthur callous crept  
With every murky, sluggard step,  
Toward whatever venture he might find  
Atop this hillock so like his own crownéd brow  
Enclosed by tines of standing stones  
— A giant's dance,  
As that which Merlin once had brought  
With wicked works from far away,  
To press the earth now for a grave  
Over his father's head.  
Yes, long had been King Uther dead.  
And crushing so the heath  
Beneath his wrinkled boot,  
The man who as a boy had been a marvel,  
Alit upon a hillock's top  
As thunder boomed in distant meadow.  
There stood twelve stones in circling wise  
Surround this dreadful warrior so dishonoured;  
And as he breathed a sigh without delight,  
The bloody clouds drew nigh  
And closed upon the height,  
And breathed themselves like loveless sighs  
— Or as the heavy breaths of one dismayed.  
The clouds of coming night took on their mantel,  
Which oft is thrown over the end of day,  
And as it is with twilight's welding spark,  
The faeries rose to have their way.

In such an hour as this, upon the fells,  
As Arthur found himself full wroth  
— His rubine cloak a banner  
On the wings of even's panting  
— He thought upon a one  
Whom long had been away from Camelot.  
His thoughts did whirl as did the clouds;  
His mind did heave as did his robe.  
He thought upon this hill of Merlin,  
Who long ago had given warning word.  
And lo! What evil cunning-work was this?

For there amid the mason circle stood  
Merlin of a sudden still.  
His glinting eyes a world could fill.  
And, seeing him, grim Arthur gathered cold,  
A part within him feeling of a sudden old,  
That, when he last had looked  
Upon this foster-father face,  
He'd been a freshly married man.

"You wonder at my apparition,  
Do you not, boy?"  
'Twas Merlin who the silence brake,  
And did so with the manner  
Only one as he would dare to don  
As when he spake to the great emp'ror  
Of the middle-earth.  
"Arturus rex!" the nations roared;  
But agéd Merlin,  
Who this blessed man had raised in part,  
Yet spoke to him as to a pup.  
"But 'tis not me as when in body I did walk  
— As when the flesh of your forebear I wore.  
I am now no more than the barrow-wights,  
A spirit fallen from the ancient chore  
Of guarding like the master  
Of a monkish school  
The children of the Trojan Brutus  
That claimed these ancient moors  
Like Joshua of old,  
From ettins  
Seven-fingered,  
Seven toed."

"What will you?" Shouted Arthur with a shudder.  
"What will you, spectre of those cursed days  
In which, with heart so full of love,  
I wedded Guinevere,  
Whom I thought surely was a dove?"

"You know full well the warning words  
With which I would have wended well your will  
So ardently aflame.  
Did I not say that she had ears for Frankish words  
— For the sweet swooning of the lordling of the  
Lake;  
But not to pour out salt upon your wounds  
Have I come to you on this night."

"Wherefore then, spectre? Speak!" The king declared,  
And why would this fallen god  
Called Merlin otherwise;  
It was his wont to speak  
— Sometimes more  
Than ear could bear to hear,  
As when in Vortigern's great bastion

By mouth of young Aurelius had fortunes told.

"I come to finally fulfil  
My dreadful purpose,  
Then be still,"  
Said Merlin's ghost.

"What purpose this that dreadful is,  
So much that it will keep you from death's kiss?"  
Bade Arthur know.

"A kiss?" said Merlin.  
"You may call it so,  
Whose soul goes westering with setting sun  
Into the bosom whence all promise flows  
— Into the keeping of truly  
The Once and Future King!  
But that is not my fate, I do fear.  
Therefore, boy, dare not remind me,  
While I am near,  
*Of death!*  
You have not seen his bony face as I  
— Abadon, which in endless hunger cries  
— For of all the mortals he devours,  
Though in truth too few,  
For him too many be in Jesu power."

"For truth, then, Merlin, it repenteth me!  
Whatever British power you may be,  
I ask you what your dreadful purpose is!"  
Said Arthur.

And now (for yes!  
I know that you who listen  
See what shall happen next  
— This is the power of a spoken text:  
To waken eyes that in the hearts of men  
Have fallen far too deep  
Into a deathlike state of sleep),  
And now the sun went westering and set;  
Its violent fires quenched by briny deep.  
Above the henge atop the hill,  
From where the world below seemed still,  
The clouds that gave the night its lack of shape,  
Drew back and caused the owls  
Amid the forests there to wake.  
Like curtain letting out a little light  
From deep within the home of Heaven's height,  
A pale dimness greyly settled on the world,  
And Arthur's courage threatened then to fold.  
For lo! What monstrous, foul and wicked shape  
Did Merlin's fallen spirit take  
Upon itself in this half-light.  
He stood there in the middle  
Of the circling stone

And bore above his brow  
 Broad antlers of a hart  
 — Not as a crown,  
 But grown steadfast unto the bone  
 That would have held the brains,  
 If meaty he had been.  
 And slender, tall, his eyes red shone  
 — This was, as many long had known,  
 A devil's son, a fallen one,  
 Which in the speech of Hebrews  
 Are called "Nephilim".

And there spoke Merlin  
 — In his burning eyes a hellish gleam  
 — His form more shadow,  
 Perhaps part dream:  
 "I come to tell you emp'ror of the western world,  
 That you are mortal, and that all you hope to do  
 — All great deeds,  
 All fell fights,  
 All things built,  
 What you bring forth by love at night  
 With wicked and with well-thought women  
 — Will all fade,  
 Will all die.  
 Whatever towers you shall raise,  
 To reach into the sky;  
 Upon the morrow on the meadows they shall lie  
 — If brickwork skulls they would have been,  
 Their brainy contents  
 Would have dashed across the green.  
 But there is more that with you I must share.  
 Indeed, I planted, long ago,  
 That sword of youth within the stone  
 — The sword that makes of orphans kings;  
 The sword that rune-bewritten was  
 — And this was but a shadow of a sword to come,  
 Which mark and bone,  
 And steel and stone  
 Could cleave in twain as keen  
 As logic of the angels sane.  
 This was all a splendid thing,  
 You surely thought, dread king.  
 But to we,  
 Who stalked these faerie glens of ancient times,  
 It stounded us none.  
 It was to us a bit of fun;  
 Much as the fun  
 The Lady of the Lake had with my carnal slave,  
 Aurelius, an orphaned son.  
 She lured me by him into a stony grave.  
 But, to the point!"  
 Said Merlin like the sounding of a horn,  
 And in the mountains above Camelot a storm  
 Drew in and cast its darts like javelins about.

The drizzle of the heavy clouds  
 Began to patter on the mud.

"What is the point?" bade Arthur know.

"The point is that our plan be nearly fully grown,  
 For you are as a fruit well ripening.  
 And then, when you have reached  
 The fullness of your flower,  
 You of all the highest of your power  
 Will be disarmed against thy will  
 By means of battle-skill;  
 The hand of haunted Mordred shall it be  
 — Thine and thy sister-son is he,  
 Who sickly is and bent,  
 Though not in strength of arms,  
 But might of mind his malady abides  
 — He shall take from thee thine branding blade,  
 Which of the veins of fallen stars is made  
 — Of fallen powers that in heaven lost the war,  
 And were swept down to earthen floor."

Then, as though this word to mark,  
 A star from heaven did depart,  
 And flashed like fires green a moment long.  
 Then it was gone again beyond the clouds.  
 And so it was that Arthur King  
 Looked down upon his Caliburn abright.  
 This was that second sword which he,  
 After the sword-in-stone did brake,  
 Received from Lady of the Lake,  
 Which raised both fair and foul,  
 Dour Lancelot du Lac,  
 Who hence, from Frankish father, Ban,  
 Was spirited away as child to Faerie-land  
 — To Avalon that lies awaiting in the west;  
 Like Abaddon, claiming to be some mortals' rest.  
 Yet more akin to Abraham's kind breast  
 Is this highly regarded roost.

From that fey land of healing water-wells  
 This star-forged tongue  
 Of dancing fire was brought  
 Unto the British peoples' shores  
 — A tongue that spoke only in blood,  
 And yet was laid in kingly hand,  
 For that the peace to keep.  
 This blade was power of the law  
 — It was the word that long before  
 The ageless elements began their work,  
 Carved out the shape  
 Of all the rivers in this middle-earth,  
 So that the waters would know where to flow,  
 As blood in veins that keeps a body whole.  
 This blade was nature's law itself,

And so by might of man corrupt,  
This power bright in hand so light  
To hold and sweep away the enemy,  
Could only lead to breaking of the law  
— A law that by the hand of fallen man undid itself.

And so the tapestry of nature all a fray  
Would fade away one day  
As do with morning-light the stars.  
Thus Arthur thought, and knew within his heart,  
That whilst the web of nature's law still was,  
His was the duty not to tatter and to trim  
The world into his own desire's frame;  
But he was greater and yet lesser  
Than all ordinary men.  
Duty was all that he was,  
No room was left for petty personal revenge.

"I see," the King of Britains then began.  
"Methinks, I see the sense within your words.  
Too oft and easily have I been stirred,  
Not by the need or weakness  
Of those I claimed to love,  
But by the lusts of mine own heart  
Which evil were from youthful start.  
Ever where I a fruit did see  
That hung like tempter's power from a tree,  
I did not keep myself from it,  
But ate it whole, and now if justice must *me* hit,  
Then so be it.  
But, Merlin, having seen thy form uncovered,  
I now know your words I must resist,  
For if by what sword in the stone  
Your cunning-work was wrought,  
And this was only but a shadow of the truth;  
This sword,  
Which came through water and the word,  
Shall surely not be bound  
By such a bitter goblin as thyself!  
I shall not suffer Mordred's talon on this hilt;  
But I shall die, and at the margin of the world,  
Shall ask mine messenger to cast this brand  
Like good news back into the Lake  
— The water whence I once did take  
The blade with thee at mine own side.  
And when 'tis done, I shall abide  
In Avalon the setting sun,  
Until the rising of the One,  
Who more than I is called  
The Once and Future King,  
Of whom I am but shadow."

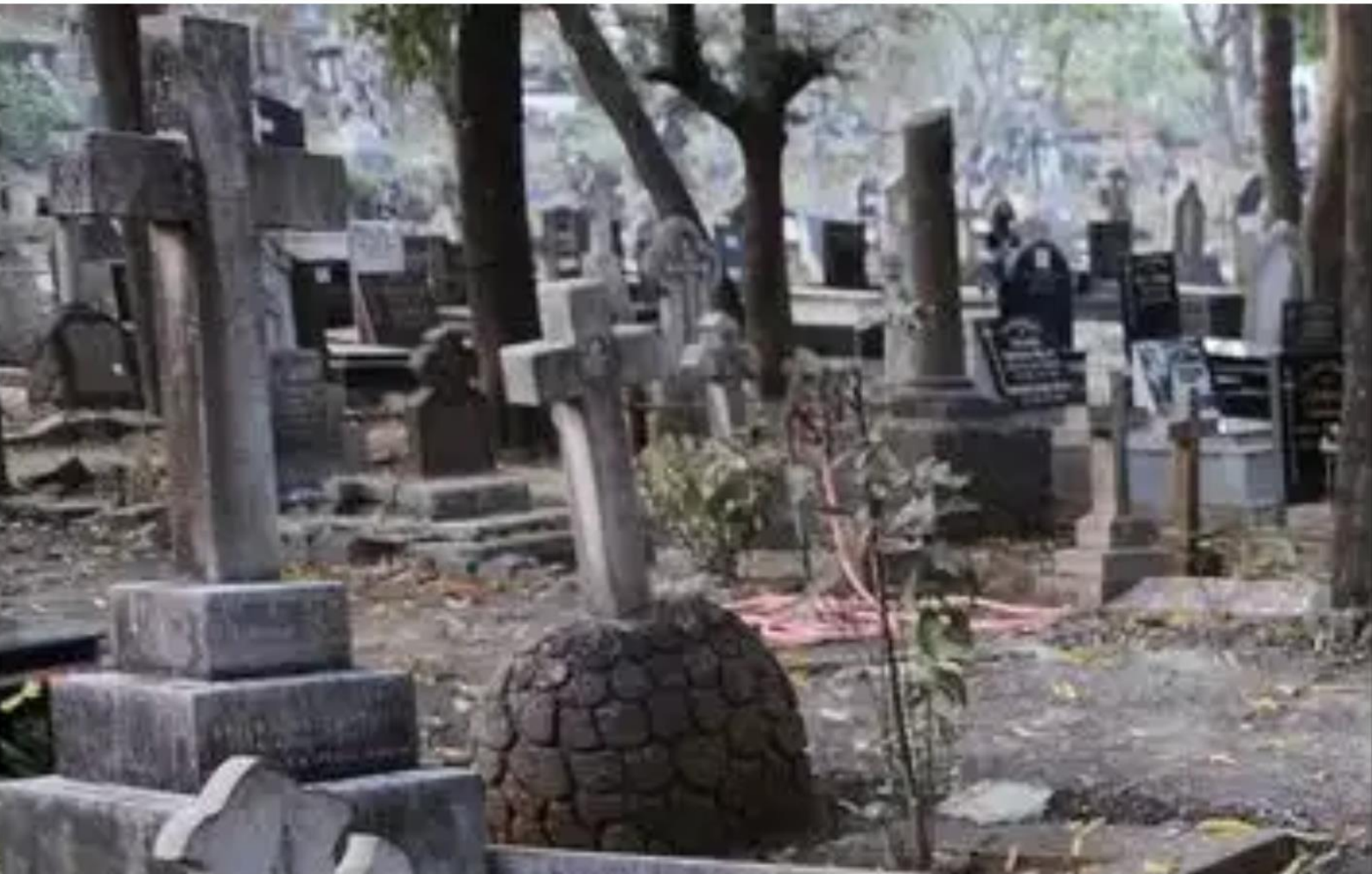
These were the words of Arthur bold  
Upon the weathered hillock's crown  
To Merlin's sleepless spirit,

And when this fallen power saw  
That Arthur's mind would bend no more,  
Just as it was with Guinevere before,  
He turned his fiercely gleaming eyes  
Like orbs of hatred onto Camelot.  
There, upon the bulwark's towers,  
Long a while that nightmare gaze  
Dwelt and brooded like the showers  
And the twirling vapours of the clouds.  
Lightnings ever and anon  
Still smote like smithing hammer on the hills,  
Rending here or there a tree,  
As though telling of the doom  
— The doom of Arthur as he waged a war  
Against the powers  
That are aged so old that they all knew  
And trembled at the thought  
Of Caliburn,  
Which forged was in the time before,  
At the very roots of day,  
Where the hills that as the pillars  
Of the heavens make their stand,  
Began to grow.  
For there is nothing quite so rare  
Nor just as frightening  
As is a truly righteous king.



# Thrown Away

Rudyard Kipling



And some are sulky, while some will plunge.

*[So ho! Steady! Stand still, you!]*

Some you must gentle, and some you must lunge.

*[There! There! Who wants to kill you?]*

Some—there are losses in every trade—  
Will break their hearts ere bitted and made,  
Will fight like fiends as the rope cuts hard,  
And die dumb-mad in the breaking-yard.

*(Toolungala Stockyard Chorus)*

TO rear a boy under what parents call the 'sheltered life system' is, if the boy must go into the world and fend for himself, not wise. Unless he be one in a thousand he has certainly to pass through many unnecessary troubles; and may, possibly, come to extreme grief simply from ignorance of the proper proportions of things.

Let a puppy eat the soap in the bath-room or chew a newly-blacked boot. He chews and chuckles until, by and by, he finds out that blacking and Old Brown Windsor make him very sick; so he argues that soap and boots are not wholesome. Any old dog about the house will soon show him the unwisdom of biting big dogs' ears. Being young, he remembers and goes abroad, at six months, a well-mannered little beast with a chastened appetite. If he had been kept away from boots, and soap, and big dogs till he came to the trinity full-grown and with developed teeth, consider how fearfully sick and thrashed he would be! Apply that notion to the 'sheltered life,' and see how it works. It does not sound pretty, but it is the better of two evils.

There was a Boy once who had been brought up under the 'sheltered life' theory; and the theory killed him dead. He stayed with his people all his days, from the hour he was born till the hour he went into Sandhurst nearly at the top of the list. He was beautifully taught in all that wins marks by a private tutor, and carried the extra weight of 'never having given his parents an hour's anxiety in his life.' What he learnt at Sandhurst beyond the regular routine is of no great consequence. He looked about him, and he found soap and blacking, so to speak, very good. He ate a little, and came out of Sandhurst not so high as he went in. Then there was an interval and a scene with his people, who expected much from him. Next a year of living unspotted from the world in a third-rate *dépôt* battalion where all the juniors were children and all the seniors old women; and lastly, he came out to India, where he was cut off from the support of his parents, and had no one to fall back on in time of trouble except himself.

Now India is a place beyond all others where one must not take things too seriously—the midday sun always excepted. Too much work and too much energy kill a man just as effectively as too much assorted vice or too much drink. Flirtation does not matter, because every

one is being transferred, and either you or she leave the Station and never return. Good work does not matter, because a man is judged by his worst output, and another man takes all the credit of his best as a rule. Bad work does not matter, because other men do worse, and incompetents hang on longer in India than anywhere else. Amusements do not matter, because you must repeat them as soon as you have accomplished them once, and most amusements only mean trying to win another person's money. Sickness does not matter, because it's all in the day's work, and if you die, another man takes over your place and your office in the eight hours between death and burial. Nothing matters except Home-furlough and acting allowances, and these only because they are scarce. It is a slack country, where all men work with imperfect instruments; and the wisest thing is to escape as soon as ever you can to some place where amusement is amusement and a reputation worth the having.

But this Boy—the tale is as old as the Hills—came out, and took all things seriously. He was pretty and was petted. He took the pettings seriously, and fretted over women not worth saddling a pony to call upon. He found his new free life in India very good. It does look attractive in the beginning, from a subaltern's point of view—all ponies, partners, dancing, and so on. He tasted it as the puppy tastes the soap. Only he came late to the eating, with a grown set of teeth. He had no sense of balance—just like the puppy—and could not understand why he was not treated with the consideration he received under his father's roof. This hurt his feelings.

He quarrelled with other boys and, being sensitive to the marrow, remembered these quarrels, and they excited him. He found whist, and gymkhanas, and things of that kind (meant to amuse one after office) good; but he took them seriously too, just as seriously as he took the 'head' that followed after drink. He lost his money over whist and gymkhanas because they were new to him.

He took his losses seriously, and wasted as much energy and interest over a two-goldmohur race for maiden *ekka*-ponies with their manes hogged, as if it had been the Derby. One-half of this came from inexperience — much as the puppy squabbles with the corner of the hearthrug — and the other half from the dizziness bred by stumbling out of his quiet life into the glare and excitement of a livelier one. No one told him about the soap and the blacking, because an average man takes it for granted that an average man is ordinarily careful in regard to them. It was pitiful to watch The Boy knocking himself to pieces, as an overhanded colt falls down and cuts himself when he gets away from the groom.

This unbridled license in amusements not worth the trouble of breaking line for, much less rioting over,

# Featured Artist

# Kristina Djordjevic

[x.com/KDjordjevicart](https://www.instagram.com/KDjordjevicart)

**How did you end up as an oil painter in Norway?** I moved here very recently, a couple months ago! My husband is Norwegian and we met at the school we studied at; The Swedish academy of Realist art in southern Sweden, later on we both taught there for a while, but we were ultimately planning to move to Norway. I've always wanted to live somewhere surrounded by beautiful nature and I've grown very fond of Scandinavian culture, so it was a very easy decision.

**What type of things you have been reading recently?** Since the birth of my daughter a year ago mainly fairytales, a lot by Andrew Lang. I'm constantly in the search of lesser known stories to read to her, but I'd lie if I told you I don't enjoy them a lot myself. Before she was born, I read Undine by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué which I am very inspired to do a piece about.

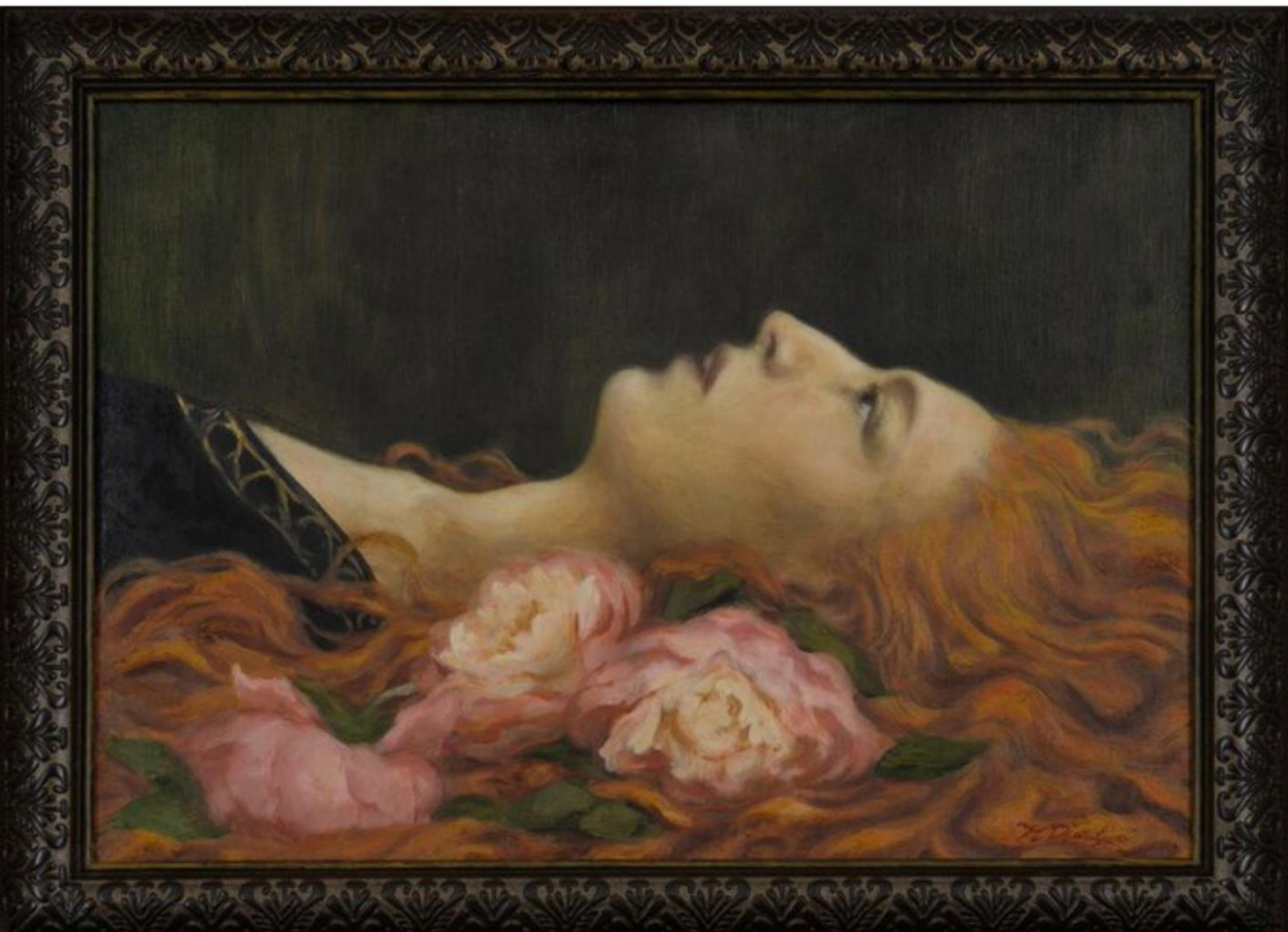






**What attracts you to oil painting?** There are many mediums to paint with and they can all be used to create beautiful results. But in my opinion none of them have the same depth and range of color or the infinite possibilities of texture that oil paint has. I wanted to learn oil painting since I was very little, I was always mesmerised looking at paintings of large historical scenes in museums. There was a short time I did a bit of digital art as I thought it was a way for me to make a living with art, but I found out that it doesn't suit me at all, I need to feel the materials that I'm using. Another thing I enjoy so much is that it is a very simple medium, mainly pigment and oil and you can make the paints, choose what you mix them with, prepare your own canvas. All of that is an absolute joy, and makes me feel a bit like an alchemist.

**Aside from painting, do you have any other passions?** I love spending time doing research on historical European clothing and what life was like throughout history. I also enjoy doing and learning new crafts and skills all the time like sewing with mainly historical techniques, knitting. I am slowly learning to play the Hardanger fiddle as well, a traditional Norwegian string instrument.





**How do you find the subject matter for your artwork?** In a number of ways. My main goal as an artist has always been to create beauty, no matter if it is a small still life or a more monumental painting with a scene. I am as well inspired by old stories and looking at art I love. A lot of my paintings start as an idea that I usually come up with doing something unrelated, then sketch it out and pick up the sketch months later to do another iteration on. I do my best to not get influenced too much by pop-culture and media, I feel like it easily sneaks into your imagination.

endured for six months—all through one cold weather—and then we thought that the heat and the knowledge of having lost his money and health and lamed his horses would sober The Boy down, and he would stand steady. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred this would have happened. You can see the principle working in any Indian Station. But this particular case fell through because The Boy was sensitive and took things seriously—as I may have said some seven times before. Of course, we could not tell how his excesses struck him personally. They were nothing very heartbreaking or above the average. He might be crippled for life financially, and want a little nursing. Still the memory of his performances would wither away in one hot weather, and the bankers would help him to tide over the money-troubles. But he must have taken another view altogether, and have believed himself ruined beyond redemption. His Colonel talked to him severely when the cold weather ended. That made him more wretched than ever ; and it was only an ordinary ‘Colonel’s wiggling’!

What follows is a curious instance of the fashion in which we are all linked together and made responsible for one another. *The* thing that kicked the beam in The Boy’s mind was a remark that a woman made when he was talking to her. There is no use in repeating it, for it was only a cruel little sentence, rapped out before thinking, that made him flush to the roots of his hair. He kept himself to himself for three days, and then put in for two days’ leave to go shooting near a Canal Engineer’s Rest House about thirty miles out. He got his leave, and that night at Mess was noisier and more offensive than ever. He said that he was ‘going to shoot big game,’ and left at half-past ten o’clock in an ekka. Partridge—which was the only thing a man could get near the Rest House—is not big game; so every one laughed.

Next morning one of the Mayors came in from short leave, and heard that The Boy had gone out to shoot ‘big game.’ The Major had taken an interest in The Boy, and had, more than once, tried to check him. The Major put up his eyebrows when he heard of the expedition, and went to The Boy’s rooms where he rummaged.

Presently he came out and found me leaving cards on the Mess. There was no one else in the ante-room.

He said, ‘The Boy has gone out shooting. *Does* a man shoot *tetur* with a revolver and writingcase?’

I said, ‘Nonsense, Major!’ for I saw what was in his mind.

He said, ‘Nonsense or no nonsense, I’m going to the Canal now—at once. I don’t feel easy.’

Then he thought for a minute, and said, ‘Can you lie?’ ‘You know best,’ I answered. ‘It’s my profession.’

‘Very well,’ said the Major, ‘you must come out with me now—at once—in an *ekka* to the Canal to shoot

black-buck. Go and put on *shikar* kit—*quickness*—and drive here with a gun.’

The Major was a masterful man, and I knew that he would not give orders for nothing. So I obeyed, and on return found the Major packed up in an *ekka*—gun—cases and food slung below—all ready for a shooting-trip.

He dismissed the driver and drove himself. We jogged along quietly while in the station ; but, as soon as we got to the dusty road across the plains, he made that pony fly. A country-bred can do nearly anything at a pinch. We covered the thirty miles in under three hours, but the poor brute was nearly dead.

Once I said, ‘What’s the blazing hurry, Major?’

He said quietly, ‘The Boy has been alone, by himself for—one, two, five,—fourteen hours now! I tell you, I don’t feel easy.’

This uneasiness spread itself to me, and I helped to beat the pony.

When we came to the Canal Engineer’s Rest House the Major called for The Boy’s servant ; but there was no answer. Then we went up to the house, calling for The Boy by name ; but there was no answer.

‘Oh, he’s out shooting,’ said I.

Just then I saw through one of the windows a little hurricane-lamp burning. This was at four in the afternoon. We both stopped dead in the verandah, holding our breath to catch every sound; and we heard, inside the room, the ‘*brr—brr—brr*’ of a multitude of flies. The Major said nothing, but he took off his helmet and we entered very softly.

The Boy was dead on the bed in the centre of the bare, lime-washed room. He had shot his head nearly to pieces with his revolver. The gun cases were still strapped, so was the bedding, and on the table lay The Boy’s writing-case with photographs. He had gone away to die like a poisoned rat!

The Major said to himself softly, ‘Poor Boy! Poor, *poor* devil!’ Then he turned away from the bed and said, ‘I want your help in this business.’

Knowing The Boy was dead by his own hand, I saw exactly what that help would be, so I passed over to the table, took a chair, lit a cheroot, and began to go through the writing-case; the Major looking over my shoulder and repeating to himself, ‘We came too late!—Like a rat in a hole!—Poor, *poor* devil!’

The Boy must have spent half the night in writing to his people, to his Colonel, and to a girl at Home ; and as soon as he had finished, must have shot himself, for he had been dead a long time when we came in.

I read all that he had written, and passed over each sheet to the Major as I finished it.

We saw from his accounts how very seriously he had taken everything. He wrote about ‘disgrace which he was unable to bear’—‘indelible shame’—‘criminal folly’—‘wasted life,’ and so on; besides a lot of private things to

his father and mother much too sacred to put into print. The letter to the girl at Home was the most pitiful of all, and I choked as I read it. The Mayor made no attempt to keep dry-eyed. I respected him for that. He read and rocked himself to and fro, and simply cried like a woman without caring to hide it. The letters were so dreary and hopeless and touching. We forgot all about The Boy's follies, and only thought of the poor Thing on the bed and the scrawled sheets in our hands. It was utterly impossible to let the letters go Home. They would have broken his father's heart and killed his mother after killing her belief in her son.

At last the Major dried his eyes openly, and said, 'Nice sort of thinto spring on an English family! What shall we-do?'

I said, knowing what the Major had brought me out for,—'The Boy died of cholera. We were with him at the time. We can't commit ourselves to half-measures. Come along.'

Then began one of the most grimly comic scenes I have ever taken part in—the concoction of a big, written lie, bolstered with evidence, to soothe The Boy's people at Home. I began the rough draft of the letter, the Major throwing in hints here and there while he gathered up all the stuff that The Boy had written and burnt it in the fireplace. It was a hot, still evening when we began, and the lamp burned very badly. In due course I made the draft to my satisfaction, setting forth how The Boy was the pattern of all virtues, beloved by his regiment, with every promise of a great career before him, and so on; how we had helped him through the sickness—it was no time for little lies, you will understand—and how he had died without pain. I choked while I was putting down these things and thinking of the poor people who would read them. Then I laughed at the grotesqueness of the affair. and the laughter mixed itself up with the choke—and the Major said that we both wanted drinks.

I am afraid to say how much whisky we drank before the letter was finished. It had not the least effect on us. Then we took off The Boy's watch, locket, and ring.

Lastly, the Major said, 'We must send a lock of hair too. A woman values that.'

But there were reasons why we could not find a lock fit to send. The Boy was black-haired, and so was the Major, luckily. I cut off a piece of the Major's hair above the temple with a knife, and put it into the packet we were making. The laughing-fit and the chokes got hold of me again, and I had to stop. The Mayor was nearly as bad; and we both knew that the worst part of the work was to come.

We sealed up the packet, photographs, locket, seals, ring, letter, and lock of hair with The Boy's sealingwax and The Boy's seal.

Then the Major said, 'For God's sake let's get outside—away from the room—and think!'

We went outside, and walked on the banks of the Canal for an hour, eating and drinking what we had with us, until the moon rose. I know now exactly how a murderer feels. Finally, we forced ourselves back to the room with the lamp and the Other Thing in it, and began to take up the next piece of work. I am not going to write about this. It was too horrible. We burned the bedstead and dropped the ashes into the Canal; we took up the matting of the room and treated that in the same way. I went off to a village and borrowed two big hoes,—I did not want the villagers to help,—while the Major arranged—the other matters. It took us four hours' hard work to make the grave. As we worked, we argued out whether it was right to say as much as we remembered of the Burial of the Dead. We compromised things by saying the Lord's Prayer with a private unofficial prayer for the peace of the soul of The Boy. Then we filled in the grave and went into the verandah—not the house—to lie down to sleep. We were dead-tired.

When we woke the Major said wearily, 'We can't go back till to-morrow. We must give him a decent time to die in. He died early *this* morning, remember. That seems more natural: So the Major must have been lying awake all the time, thinking.

I said, 'Then why didn't we bring the body back to cantonments?'

The Major thought for a minute. 'Because the people bolted when they heard of the cholera. And the *ekka* has gone!'

That was strictly true. We had forgotten all about the *ekka*-pony, and he had gone home.

So we were left there alone, all that stifling day, in the Canal Rest House, testing and re-testing our story of The Boy's death to see if it was weak in any point. A native appeared in the afternoon, but we said that a *Sahib* was dead of cholera, and he ran away. As the dusk gathered, the Major told me all his fears about The Boy, and awful stories of suicide or nearly-carried-out suicide—tales that made one's hair crisp. He said that he himself had once gone into the same Valley of the Shadow as The Boy, when he was young and new to the country; so he understood how things fought together in The Boy's poor jumbled head. He also said that youngsters, in their repentant moments, consider their sins much more serious and ineffaceable than they really are. We talked together all through the evening and rehearsed the story of the death of The Boy. As soon as the moon was up, and The Boy, theoretically, just buried, we struck across country' for the Station. We walked from eight till six o'clock in the morning; but though we were dead-tired, we did not forget to go to The Boy's rooms and put away his revolver with the proper amount of cartridges in the pouch. Also to set his writing-case on the table. We found the Colonel and reported the death, feeling more

like murderers than ever. Then we went to bed and slept the clock round, for there was no more in us.

The tale had credence as long as was necessary; for every one forgot about The Boy before a fortnight was over. Many people, however, found time to say that the Major had behaved scandalously in not bringing in the

body for a regimental funeral. The saddest thing of all was the letter from The Boy's mother to the Major and me—with big inky blisters all over the sheet. She wrote the sweetest possible things about our great kindness, and the obligation she would be under to us as long as she lived.

All things considered, she was under an obligation, but not exactly as she meant.



# The Fire

LR Scott



“Byron,” the Superior held the bridge of his nose in his fingers, “Not only is it forbidden for you to write a world which has creatures in it, but it is *impossible*. The Brother Inquisitor and myself have both inspected your world and found nothing deeply amiss. Yet—one of your brothers entered your world and that brother died in your world.”

Byron opened his mouth to speak, and the Superior held up a hand to silence him— “Frankly, Brother Byron, I am not interested in anything you have to say right now except for your response to the proposal I am going to present to you. You insist that there is a created being in your world that was created *with the world* and not intentionally by you. Very well—*show us*. If the Brother Inquisitor and myself can be shown this...creature...you suggest, we will accept your story that it is what killed Brother Amos, and you will be excommunicated from the order for a forbidden act of creation. If you cannot show us this creature, we will try you for the murder of Brother Amos, and you will be penalized according to the Ordinances of Justice. Or, you may bypass both of these options and choose simple exile from the order.”

A tense silence descended over the room. Byron weighed his options while the Superior glared at him from across the desk.

Byron said, finally: “I will prove it to you.”

The Superior sighed. “Very well. I will discuss this with the Brother Inquisitor. You are dismissed.”

= = =

“Superior, respectfully, but that is the worst idea I have ever heard. Brother Amos of blessed memory is *murdered* by that madman and you propose to let him live? Amos was our *friend*! That’s not justice!” Brother Manheim was more angry than the Superior had ever seen him, and he didn’t like that he had brought a gang of friends.

“Brothers, it is not for you to decide what justice is or isn’t. Authority over this matter has been charged to me!” He spoke and gestured with a ferocity that stunned the other Brothers but not Manheim. “I am responsible for your safety, for the execution of justice in compliance with the Ordinances, and for numerous other matters of which you are scarcely aware!” his voice had risen to a shout. He continued more softly: “And I tell you this! I don’t appreciate being accosted by this discourteous rabble.”

“What are you going to do to make this right, Superior? Brother Amos is dead. His blood will be on *your* hands if you let Brother Byron go.”

“I will do what I feel is good and right, and you *will* abide by it. Do you understand me?” He glared at Brother Manheim for a tense moment, before proceeding casually: “Clearly you don’t have enough work to do, if you’ve got time to gossip and confront me

in the hallway. You’ll be working in the quarry tomorrow, Brothers! Good day!”

The Superior turned and walked away, his hands tingling with adrenaline.

= = =

Byron was in the library, he had placed his book on the stone lectern in the center. It was a large book—Byron knew every page like he knew the streets of his home town. In the leather cover, Byron’s sigil had been engraved. The sigil glistened in the evening light, it seemed to emit a light of its own, barely perceptible yet it gave the sigil an unearthly feel. He put his hands on either side of the book, and closed his eyes. *I have to be sure*. He opened to the front page, and placed his hand in the circle of runes, chanted the ancient tongue—

It felt like he fell through the book—the page no longer supporting his weight, it gave way and he tumbled, a great wind rushing past him and through him. He landed on his feet, as if he had jumped from a high place.

He looked around—it was night. Two moons glowed full in the sky. Byron had been working on writing a monastery around this spot—it was still in progress. He walked out of the facility, away from the lectern and book in the center of that circular room, and looked out at the untamed wilderness. A forest of evergreen trees to his left, to his right a small dirt path led away to a town in the distance—dark, and uninhabited.

*Where is it?*

The hair on the back of his neck stood up—Byron felt eyes on him. He looked around—there, there in the woods, two glowing eyes, menacing, locked on to him.

Byron became tense—ready to run at any moment back to the lectern and book, just a few paces behind him.

The eyes fell low, and the creature—impossible to see except for its eyes in the darkness—began crawling, slowly, towards him. Byron’s heart pounded in his chest—face to face, again, with this beast. *What are you?*

The creature stopped—looked up and away, as if hearing some sound—and it turned and ran back into the forest.

Orange embers floated past—was there a fire? Byron looked around, turned behind him—there, in the sky, an orange, burning circle, and within was...nothing. Not that it was dark, or black—it was nothingness. Burning circles began to appear in the air around him, the masonry of the monastery began to glow orange. It was as if reality itself was on fire. *They are burning the book!*

Byron rushed back to the lectern, flipped open to the runes, and muttered the incantation. He waited a moment that felt like ages, and finally fell through.

He landed in a fire, and lost his footing and fell into the flames. He screamed as the embers seared his hands, and he rolled out the fire—instinctively, like a father rescuing a fallen child, he reached back in to save his book, pages already turning black, and threw it on the

dirt. He hit the book with his robes to put out the flames. He grit his teeth through the pain of his burning clothes and hands and hair—at the pain of his life's work being tossed into a fire.

He finally looked up, and saw Brother Manheim smugly looking down at him, surrounded by his gang of Brothers. Rage boiled inside him.





# Tales of Roma: The Beast of Tarentium

The Brothers Krynn



The shadows of the town were omnipresent. None could escape them, it seemed so that it appeared as though they might devour each and every house of the town of Tarentium. Oppressive and cruel, the shadows that lapped away from the earth upwards even as rain descended from the heavens, as though seeking to wash away the darkness that had befallen the town. None of the people took notice of the rain, as they stepped along, each of them pleased with themselves for what they had done so recently.

"This shan't be right," Whispered one of the few outsiders to another, a stout man in thick furs and Dorian hoplite armour.

"Never you mind what is right, just be quiet," Snapped the other, his chin armed with a thick beard even as he was dressed in much the same style.

The two had journeyed across the length and breadth of Hyspania, doing the bidden of Punicia's greatest generals. It was to the mind of Hamildar's reason enough, never to question the orders they received.

The rite which they had invited to participate in, by one of the locals was one that Hamildar had not wished to participate in. Not that this meant he could refuse them, as a singular look into the eyes of the invitee had told him it was wiser to accept.

It was when they stood near to the tree near the center of the town that he once more, felt overwhelmed by unease. It was there that they were to press into a small hole in the middle of the dark bark of the tree.

"Hamildar, what is happening?" The other sell-sword demanded of him.

"I do not know Alexander," He snapped impatiently, hardly glancing at the other man too struck by how everyone was staring at them expectantly.

The cold sweat that trailed down his back had no place doing so, and was a source of embarrassment for him. But even as the sentiment washed over him, he felt it wiped away by the colder hand of dread.

It happened that as several of the children were given over to the rite, he felt oddly as though he were waiting before the block himself or as though he were about to be nailed to the cross himself. It was ridiculous, he had attended countless rituals, and had nailed unnumbered dozens of men to too many crosses and yet this feeling would not be wiped away.

"I do not like this," Alexander murmured to him.

By now, as the hours had ticked by, and as the wind had shifted icily, and the moon had disappeared Hamildar had no answer for him, he could only nod glumly.

"It is now time for the sacrifice," The mayor of the town announced with a small smile on his bearded lips.

"Sacrifice? What sacrifice?" Hamildar queried of the mayor, his hand coming to rest where his sword was.

It was only as the crowd gathered nearer to him and his men that a strange thing happened, even as the mayor spoke; they noticed that their swords had disappeared. "Why we had in mind one that our god has not had ere, this moment."

"Stay back- what? Where has my sword gone?" Hamildar asked stunned to find even the scabbard missing, with his men swift to notice much the same.

"Do something, Hamildar!" Some of his men shouted in a panic.

"Come now, why do you scream so, Hamildar?" The mayor demanded of the head of the sell-sword company that had entered the village. "Surely, you knew that this was expected of you?"

To which the sell-sword captain began to shout, "My sword! My sword! Where in Tanit's name could it have gone?!"

And then all sounds, save the screams of the men who had served Punicia for years, were silenced forevermore...

## II

In the years since the founding of the Res Publica, or 'Public Thing' as all men of Roma and the peninsula of Tirreinia knew it, there had been war, famine, plague and betrayal that have all rocked the city. In the years since Marcus Lievenus, had first joined the army in the hopes to defend his homeland from Punicia and her ravaging hordes, had seen much.

But never anything quite so unsettling as the manner in which the people, of the town of Tarentium at present looked upon him with.

"I do not much like these people, sir," One of his men Sextus Tarallius grunted with a wary look all about them. "Even the children, stare."

"Whatever do you mean? I do not see anything," Marcus Punius haughtily, the son of a merchant with rather high aspirations he was always comporting himself foolishly. And it was always Sextus or Marcus who had to save him.

Inclined to agree with Sextus as they scouted out the small barbarian town, with its newly built Dorian styled housing, Marcus could not repress a shiver.

It was not that there was hatred in the eyes of the people, but rather a sort of exultation at the sight of them. Even the children seemed to express some measure of relief, at the vision of Scipione's scouts pouring into the town, proclaiming that the village had been liberated.

"They do not appear terribly overjoyed to be liberated," Sextus's younger brother Titus remarked, a legionnaire, who was as tall and muscular as his sibling he was however the more impulsive of the two.

Considering the blonde man's words, dark haired Marcus suppressing his own sense of repulsion towards the people of the town so as to take command, once more of his unit. They had been assigned a task by their general, and he would sooner perish than disappoint him. "Sextus, take three of the men, and scout out to the north of the village. Marcus you will search the village with the rest of the men, in search of any possible enemy sell-swords hiding in their midst."

"Why must I take up that task? Let Sextus do it," Whined Marcus Punius to the irritation of his superior officer.

A single look and the motion of reaching for the lash, tied to the back of the horse was enough to send the squealing pig along. Still the people stared.

Disconcerted despite himself, Marcus uneasily moved to examine the local shore, as he had also been ordered to do. The village was six days journey from the city of Nova Carthago, and it was crucial that they scout it out, to determine if there was any hint of danger. This along with the knowledge that there had to be hidden troops, somewhere between the Fourth Legio Victoris and the city gave the Centurion a sense of urgency.

Searching by the sea, he took note of the waves, of the position of the clouds though he did not quite understand why this was so crucial to the general, he did these things. The tide in particular he noted, just as he reminded himself to return after dark to take into account the position of the moon.

It was as he trod along the coastline ignoring as best he could some of those villagers who continued to follow him with their gazes. The children in particular daunted and worried him. Children should not behave so calmly, and behave themselves so quietly.

In his home-town near to Rasenna, north-east of Roma children could always be heard or seen playing or racing about to this task or to a local grammar school. In his brief time in Roma, they could be seen doing much the same.

This was why the lack of activity and ongoing, exultation and anxiety of the children throughout the village chilled him so.

The sea once fully studied, was turned away from so that Marcus may return amongst the people of Tarentium. "I must speak with the mayor of the town, if you have one."

The Mayor was sent for and was promptly presented to the Centurion, his bearded lips stretched out in a wide yellow grin. It was a smile every inch as false as most others that Marcus had seen, throughout the whole of the peninsula of Hyspania, since he had joined the General in the peninsular land.

"I should very much like to speak to you in return," He replied smoothly with the sort of geniality that one

might almost have thought genuine. If one was a fool that is.

And Marcus was no fool. Staring long and hard at the mayor, he was to ask of the man, whilst holding up his finding from the beach, "And what is this? This looks to be a Punician silver-coin? The sort they give over to their sell-swords."

It was easily recognised also due in no small part, to how some legions were paid with the same sort of coinage. It was at times easier to seize Punician coins, and to pay the legions with them, or so the General had once explained to him.

The legions had not yet reached the village of Tarentium though, so that it could not be easily explained just how this particular coin had reached such a place.

Upon remarking upon this issue, the chieftain became nervous, and was to bluster and stutter, "Never you mind that, it must have come from that ship that sailed past, some weeks hence."

"What ship?" The keen interest in his voice silenced the mayor once more, this time the man realised that he oughtn't have answered by making reference to a passing ship.

Swallowing audibly, as several of his people glared furiously at him, the Mayor grumbled into his beard. Aware that he had made an apparent mistake, he simply contented himself with glaring at the Centurion, who did not deign to glance at him once more.

The question of the ship was unlikely to be one that he was to receive a proper answer to. It was later with his men, as they rested in their tent just outside of the village that he spoke of it with them.

"Impossible," Sextus retorted, "If there was any ship that sailed past this region, it would be one of Punicia's fleet but somehow, it is doubtful that it sails still."

This was consistent with Marcus's own knowledge.

"What have you discovered?" He asked, changing the topic to their investigations.

"Only that there are no weapons or signs of Hamal's army having sent any scouts or recruitment officers to this village," the other Marcus answered with a frustrated shrug of his shoulders.

The lot of them in the middle of eating their supper, which consisted of dry rations and some simple wine they had stored in wineskins. The lot of them had to keep from wrinkling their noses as they devoured their few rations.

They could have accepted some of the food from the locals, but few were willing to accept, any that was on offer.

Inclined to believe his men, Marcus fell to brooding. Orders were orders, and this village awoke in his mind naught but suspicion and mistrust. Yet there was no

further reason to stay, in spite of his desire to investigate and search out the whole of the village.

He was interrupted from his brooding and questioning into the nature of the village's lack of suspicious behaviour, in spite of their peculiar behaviour. The interruption came in the form, of giggles and more than a dozen attractive young maidens.

Most of the men turned where they sat upon the ground, at the sight of the scantily clad maids who in some cases Marcus felt suspicious he had seen, with some of the men and children. Not that this truly mattered, to a number of his men nor did it matter a great deal to him.

What mattered most was how taken his men were with these women.

"I do not trust these women," He grumbled beneath his breath, "They stared me down when I stood by yon beach."

"What of it?" Sextus asked with a short chortle.

When one of them approached him also, her scantily clad slender body pressed against him, and full lips temptingly near as she danced about him.

The temptation to give in, swept over Marcus and he at last cast aside his worries over the village and the nagging sense of wrongness.

### III

Sextus had now gone missing, as had Quintus and a number of the others. Quite where they had gone, was a mystery to Marcus.

All sense pointed to one of the villagers. Somehow this did not seem to fit with his judgement. It was as he regained consciousness and became aware of a scraping sound that Marcus was to become filled with panic.

Hearing muttering above him, with both voices very evidently feminine ones, he knew at once something had gone horribly wrong. Any other man might well have laughed, at being dragged along the ground or might have remained stricken with worry. But not Marcus.

Though it took him a moment to sooth his pounding head, and to figure out what he should do exactly, he soon weighed down upon the hands dragging him with his booted feet.

The women struggled a little more than prior to that moment, exchanged puzzled glances wherefore they looked down at him.

Such was the wrath that decorated his face, the rage that lit his eyes that the two of them, hardly older than he himself was took fright. Dropping his feet, they took fright and tempted as he was to pursue them, dagger in hand and bloodlust consuming his heart he did not.

Once more upon his feet, he was to after having rubbed at the back of his head, returned to the tent that the legates and he had erected. They had done so, with the notion that it was to stand as a fort against the local town and the tribe that inhabited it.

Upon his return, Marcus discovered it to be wholly emptied of men and women, the stench of their play made him wrinkle his nose, and his brow furrowed at the knowledge that his men had disappeared. The search for his missing sword did not take long, wherefore he heard a scream that brought a chill to his blood.

It was thence that he knew what had become of his men. And knew what it was that the two women who had dragged him, away from the tent had schemed.

Sword in hand, he tore a path from the tent in search of his men.

### IV

The village heads as Marcus discovered, were in the midst of doing the unthinkable to his former patrol members; burning them at the stake. The table they had laid out, left little in the way of doubt that they might have further wickedness in mind, for those they had sacrificed to their wicked god.

Arriving in time, to discover Sextus, the last of those still alive and tied to a nearby marble statue as those who had been sacrificed before him were, as a torch neared the gathered hay and branches that had been laid there.

Quite why they were sacrificing people to the deformed ox-headed statue with stag horns, and the body of a man, was a mystery he did not much care to investigate or pause to analyse. Rather, he was more interested in destroying those who threatened his men. Or rather the last of his men, sword well in hand and rage blackening his vision so that when he arrived thither amongst them, he was to swing and slice at all around him.

The first of the men that he cut down which he recognised, happened to be one of the husbands of the women he had seen the night hitherto this early morning.

"Back, you demons from Tartarus!" He snapped at them, mad with rage and righteous hate, his sword quivering as he menaced those nearest, having severed the arm of one of the men at the elbow.

The man who had held the torch towards the statue, screaming and crying out was pulled back by his neighbours, who glared foul hatred in response to the Romalian who stood before them.

"You have no knowledge of what it is that you trifle with, Laevinus," The mayor growled from where he stood, even as he backed away and Marcus cut down the bonds that bound Sextus to the statue.

"And I should hazard a guess that neither did the sell-swords of Punicia?" Marcus guessed at once, "The coin by the shore gave away what it was that you did to them."

If he had hoped for some sort of sense of revulsion or shame, he was destined to be disappointed.

Shrugging his shoulders, the mayor of the village smiled a grin full of rotting teeth and malice, "And? What of it?"

That was reason enough to bellow, and leap at him to hew him down.

It was after the mayor's last scream was torn from his lips, and his blood spilled and as the people backed away farther from the warrior that he came to notice an oddity about the locals. Most retained their sense of amusement, their eyes blackened beyond compare as they stared past Marcus.

Bewildered with his blood up, Marcus almost threw himself forward against them to continue the slaughter. It was Sextus though who saved him, by placing a hand upon his shoulder. "Sir, behind us!"

Confused, Marcus did as bidden to find to his utter shock the great bull statue, no longer quite so marble-white. Black in flesh, and with shining, glimmering eyes that seemed to stare through his very soul, the Centurion could only gape.

He might well have given himself over to despair in that moment, such was the shock that overwhelmed him in that moment.

Growling the beast sought to swipe at him, with claws that were no less sharp than the daggers still girded to his waist.

Backing away, as the people had, that route was soon blocked for him as he was pushed towards the beast by the locals. Rolling with the momentum, so that he was carried between the legs of the monster, even as it swiped at him tearing asunder a number of its own worshippers.

Unsheathing one of his many daggers, he was to attempt to sever the serpentine shaped tail that swung about behind the monster. Slashing at it with this dagger, he was startled when his blade shattered almost at once.

Prepared to swipe at it with his sword, he only just to say turned his blade away so that he took the blow from the tail to the chest. Knocked aside, he was sent flying through the air so that he hit one of the nearby huts with his air leaving his lungs.

His head spinning Marcus took a long moment, to regain his feet wherefore he was to bear witness to the death of Sextus.

Shouting out the name of Roma, the city and goddess that had birthed the greatest civilisation that lived, he was to throw himself against the beast who struck back against him. The claws of the beast cutting through the armour of the legionnaire, and the flesh and bones that lay beneath so that the soldier was dead ere the wind once more, beat against them.

Filled with horror Marcus was soon swept up by the force of his rage in the next seconds, wherefore he threw himself forward picking up the sword of his friend along the way.

The bellow of rage that was torn from his throat, as he charged swords swinging and thrusting at the beast that simply stepped back when necessary and at other times

slashed back at him. Evading and ducking below the enormous arms of the beast.

It was only when he attempted to hew through one of those arms, and the result was that of another broken sword that Marcus slowed. Wearied, and panting he only now took notice of the various cuts, scraped and broken pieces of armour that he came to realise that he was only tiring himself.

Dodging another attempt to hew him down, he was however seized by the beast by the right arm, its crushing grasp made him scream even as he squirmed.

Lifted off his feet, he might well have panicked however little could the beast have known that, he was in reality ambidextrous. Underestimating, for it had slashed along his arm earlier shedding a great deal of blood so that it could be excused for thinking the limb by this time harmless. The sword he held with that arm, was that which had shattered against the fur of the demonic brute.

It was only as the rage was bled from him, and that the beast lifted him higher and higher that the Centurion realised what a stroke of fortune this was.

Acting on that thought, the moment it opened its mouth he struck out with his broken hilt-shard. Stabbing through the throat of the beast, who let loose the most hoarse and shrill shriek he had ever heard in all his years.

Dropped, Marcus struck the ground hard only to act quickly, having let go of his hilt-shard which had remained embedded in the back of the throat of the beast. Evading the flailing arms, he was to kick down upon the hilt with his foot, ere he lifted up his other blade – that of Sextus.

"There will be no rest, nor any mercy where you are bound beast!" He growled with all the hate he could muster. The sword bore down through the throat of the monster.

V

"What happened next?" General Scipione demanded of him, his fingers steepled together before him, his elbows upon the table in his pavilion.

Standing before the finest of Roma's heroes, stiff as a corpse, yet weary as only the living can be Marcus replied to the blonde-man in his most respectful voice. "It fell dead, sir. Shortly thereafter, all of the people of the local region did so as well."

"Really now? They must have sold some part of their souls to the demon," Scipione murmured thoughtfully, "I had heard some talk of such rituals in Punicia and their colonies, or amongst their allies. Truly they are a wretched people."

"I can only agree sir."

"Outside of that you found naught but dust, and trees standing between the city of Nova Carthrago and our present position?" The general pressed urgently.

“Aye sir,” Marcus replied and there was much he wished to add. Much he might have said, regarding the losses he had suffered, how the half-devoured burnt remains continued to haunt his dreams. What was worse, was the vision of the desiccated remains of those

children whom had been sacrificed soul and body, to the beast.

But he did not say much more. He had no wish to, for there was neither a reason, nor any wish on his part to do so. Best let the darkest of nightmares fade into the very darkness that spawned them.



# The Demon of Spreyton

S. Baring-Gould, M.A.



**About the month of November** last in the Parish of Spraiton, one Francis Fey (servant to Mr. Philip Furze) being in a Field near the Dwelling house of the said Master, there appeared unto him the resemblance of an old Gentleman, like his Master's Father, with a Pole or Staff in his hand, like that he was wont to carry when living, to kill Moles withal. The Spectrum approached near the young Man, who was not a little surprised at the Appearance of one whom he knew to be dead, but the Spectrum bade him have no Fear, but tell his Master that several Legacies, which by his Testament he had bequeathed were unpaid, naming ten shillings to one, ten shillings to another, both which he named. The young man replied that the party last named was dead, and so it could not be paid to him. The Ghost answered, He knew that, but it must be paid to the next relative, whom he also named. The Spectrum likewise ordered him to carry twenty shillings to a Gentlewoman, sister of the Deceased, living at Totnes, and promised if these things were done, to trouble him no more. At the same time the Spectrum speaking of his second wife (also dead) called her a wicked Woman, though the Relater knew her and esteemed her as a good Woman."

The spectre vanished. The young man did as enjoined and saw that the legacies were duly paid, and he took twenty shillings to the gentlewoman near Totnes; but she utterly refused to receive it, believing it to have been sent to her by the devil.

That same night, the young man, who was lodging in the house of his former master's sister, saw the ghost again. The youth thereupon remonstrated with it and reminded it of the promise made no more to annoy him, and he explained that the deceased man's sister refused to accept the money. Then the spirit bade the young man take horse, ride into Totnes, and buy a ring of the value of twenty shillings, and assured him that the lady would receive that.

Next day, after having delivered the ring, that was accepted, the young man was riding home to his master's, accompanied by a servant of the gentlewoman near Totnes, and as they entered the parish of Spreyton, the ghost was seen sitting on the horse behind the youth. It clasped its long arms about his waist and flung him from his saddle to the ground. This was witnessed by several persons in the road, as well as by the serving man from Totnes.

On entering the yard of Mr. P. Furze's farm, the horse made a bound of some twenty-five feet, to the amazement of all.

Soon after this a female ghost appeared in the house, and was seen by the same young man, as also by Mrs. Thomasine Gidley, Anne Langdon, and a little child. She was able to assume various shapes: sometimes she appeared as a dog, belching fire, at another she went out of the window in the shape of a horse, breaking one

pane of glass and a piece of iron. It was certainly vastly considerate of her in the bulk of a horse to do so little damage! But usually she stalked along the passage and appeared in the rooms in her own form. No doubt could exist as to who this trouble-some ghost was. The "spectrum" of the old gentleman had already hinted that his second wife was a bad woman, and could make herself unpleasant.

On one occasion, invisible hands laid hold of the young man, and rammed his head into a narrow space between the bedstead and the wall, and it took several persons to extricate him; and then, what with fright and what with the pressure, he was so unwell that a surgeon was sent for to bleed him. No sooner was this operation performed, than the ligatures about the arm were suddenly snatched at and torn off, and slung about his waist, and there drawn so tight that he was nearly suffocated. They had to be cut through with a knife to relieve him. At other times his cravat was drawn tight.

The spectre was of a playful humour sometimes, and would pluck the perukes off the heads of people, and one that was on top of a cabinet in a box, with a joint-stool on it, was drawn out and ripped to shreds—and this was the most costly wig in the house.

At another time the youth's "shoe-string" was observed without assistance of hands to come out of his shoe of its own accord and cast itself to the other side of the room, whereupon the other shoe-lace started crawling after its companion. A maid espying this, with her hand drew it back, when it clasped and curled round her hand like an eel or serpent.

The young man's clothes were taken off and torn to shreds, as were those of another servant in the house, and this while they were on their backs. A barrel of salt was seen to march out of one room and into another, untouched by human hands. When the spectre appeared in her own likeness she was habited in the ordinary garments of women at the time, especially like those worn by Mrs. Philip Furze, her daughter-in-law.

On Easter Eve the young man was returning from the town when he was caught by the female spectre by his coat and carried up into the air, head, legs, and arms dangling down.

Having been missed by his master and fellow servants, search was made for him, but it was not till half an hour later that he was found at some distance from the house plunged to his middle in a bog, and in a condition of ecstasy or trance, whistling and singing. He was with difficulty extracted and taken to the house and put to bed. All the lower part of his body was numbed with cold from long immersion in the morass. One of his shoes was found near the doorstep of the house, another at the back of the house, and his peruke was hanging among the top branches of a tree. On his recovery he protested that the spirit had carried him aloft till his



master's house had seemed to him no bigger than a haycock.

As his limbs remained benumbed he was taken to Crediton on the following Saturday to be bled. After the operation he was left by himself, but when his fellows came in they found his forehead cut and swollen and bleeding. According to him, a bird with a stone in its beak had flown in at the window and dashed it at his brow. The room was searched; no stone, but a brass weight was found lying on the floor.

"This is a faithful account of the Contents of a Letter from a Person of Quality in Devon, dated 11 May, 1683. The young man will be 21 if he lives to August next."

The title of this curious pamphlet is: "A Narrative of the Demon of Spraiton. In a Letter from a Person

of Quality in the County of Devon, to a Gentleman in London, with a Relation of an Apparition or Spectrum of an Ancient Gentleman of Devon who often appeared to his Son's Servant. With the Strange Actions and Discourses happening between them at divers times. As likewise, the Demon of an Ancient Woman, Wife of the Gentleman aforesaid. With unparell'd varieties of strange Exploits performed by her: Attested under the Hands of the said Person of Quality, and likewise a Reverend Divine of the said County. With Reflections on Drollery and Atheism, and a Word to those that deny the Existence of Spirits." London, 1683.

It is pretty obvious that the mischievous and idle youth was at the bottom of all this bedevilment. This was but an instance of the Poltergeist that so exercised the minds of Körner, Mrs. Crowe, and the like, but which can all be traced back to a knavish servant.



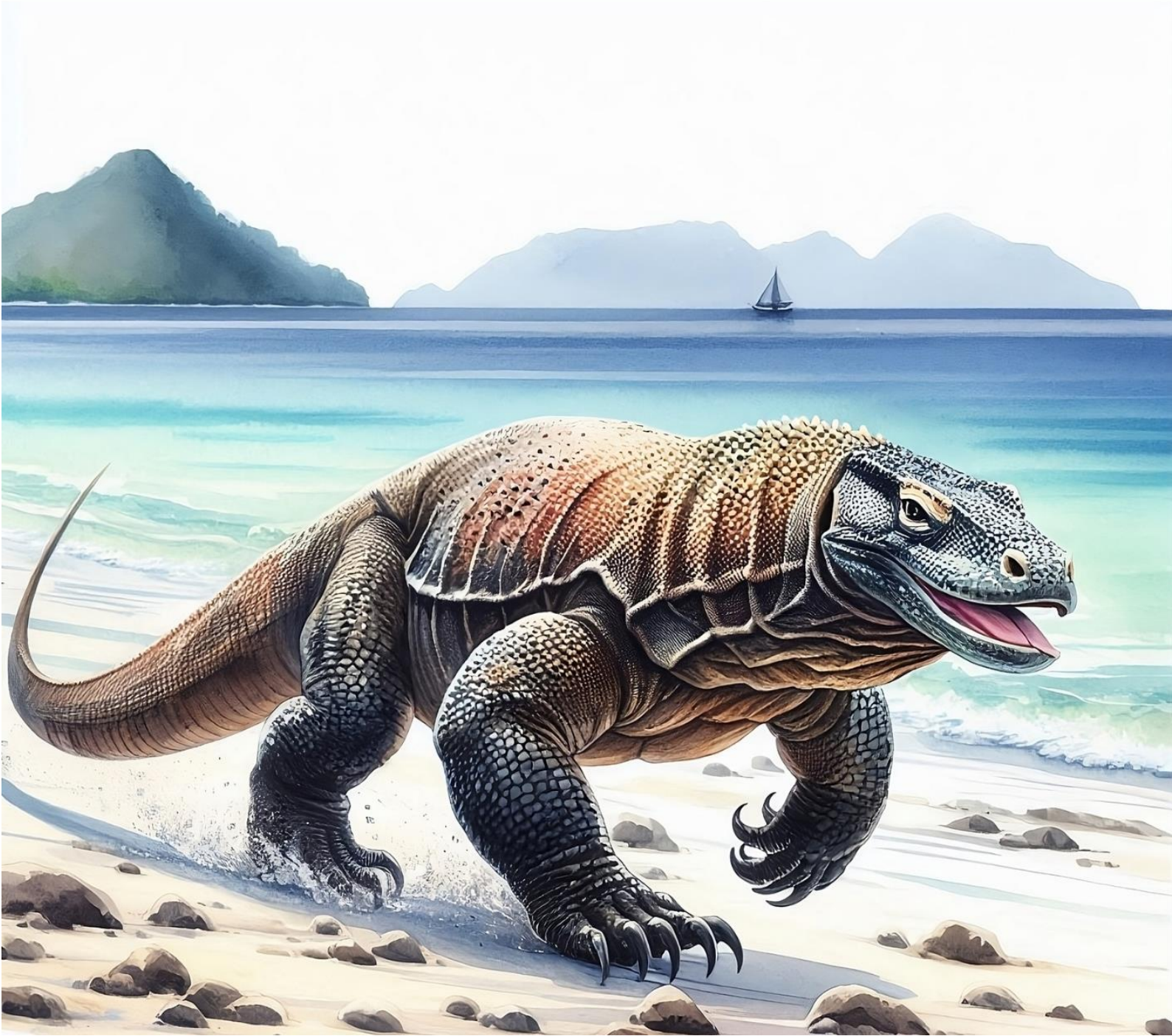
# Druid

# Without a Home

Chapter 8

Kimodo George

Call of the Shieldmaiden



**The figure of a man sped across the beach.** Degore squinted towards him. "Someone over there in a great hurry," he remarked, drawing the others' attention.

They had been passing a small, forest-covered island which had, until now, shown no sign of life.

Clancy pulled at the rudder and the boat moved closer towards the island.

"Just don't get too close," said Grudaire, peering down into the water, "we don't want to run aground on a hidden sandbar."

Now that they were closer they could see the man was being chased. A huge lizard was after him. It was about 10 feet long and was gaining on the man. The lizard was yellow-grey in colour, with huge jaws and a sturdy tail. The fleeing man turned to look back at the lizard and noticed the boat drawing up parallel to him. With a yell he bounded into the water and began to swim towards them rapidly.

Clancy dangled a rope over the side of the boat. "Surely the lizard cannot swim!?"

As if to prove him wrong, the lizard shot off the beach and into the water. The man reached the boat and grabbed onto the rope as tightly as the lizard wanted to grab onto him. Clancy and Grudaire hauled him up and Degore reached down to hoist him over the gunwale. The lizard reached the boat just as the man was deposited into it.

The stranger was panting heavily and Clancy brought him some water—his salt and pepper hair was plastered across his forehead and his brilliant blue eyes bulged and retracted with each pant. The lizard patiently circled the boat, but made no motion to attack. Presently the man caught his breath and, looking over the side of the boat at the lizard, he called it a bastard and a curr, then sank back to the bottom of the boat and pulled out a slice of dried lemon from his pocket. It looked a bit damp, but he munched away, making unusual contorted faces, yet continuing to eat the zesty fruit.

"What was going on there?" asked Grudaire, when the man looked in fuller possession of his senses.

"I cut my leg," the stranger informed them, showing a small, insignificant cut above his heel. His bare feet were calloused and brown, and looked as if they did not know the feeling of shoes. "The lizards can smell blood from miles off."

The man brushed back his long shaggy hair and adjusted his dishevelled, green linen robes. "I am Komodo George." He offered his hand to Grudaire. Grudaire took it and introduced the company.

Degore began to guide the boat out towards the open water. "Why were you on the island?" Grudaire was asking when a shout from Clancy drew their attention to the water. It was teeming with lizards.

"The bastards can run and swim." Komodo George looked at the swimming bodies with displeasure.

"I was doing some research on them, when I got this cut—and the rest you know."

"Were you alone?" Grudaire inquired.

"Yes, no one else to rescue." Komodo George pulled a sheet of vellum from under his chiton. "This is the important thing." He showed them his drawings. "I am studying their bite, so I dissected a head and did some quick sketches before more dragons arrived to eat their own."

"Are these dragons? Where are their wings?" Clancy asked.

"These are a different type of dragon altogether," Komodo George said. "Less intelligent than the winged variety, speechless, flightless."

"How do they bite?" Degore inquired.

"The mouth clamps down and the neck muscles pull back, leaving a gaping wound." The man's words sent a shudder down Degore's spine. "There is a theory that their saliva is also poisonous."

Clancy was staring across the sea intently. "I see a boat!" he exclaimed. "It looks like it has green and red stripes."

Komodo George came over and looked in the same direction. "Oh, that's my boat, the Orange! She must have slipped her mooring."

They drew alongside the tiny vessel and Clancy leapt down and attached it so it could be towed.

As they continued on their way they told Komodo George of their adventures and asked where the closest land was.

"You can come to Claytonious." George glanced up at the stars, which were only just starting to come out. "I can't see them well enough, but if we continue on at this pace then by daybreak we will see merchant ships to follow."

"What kind of place is it?" asked Grudaire.

"A city of art and industry!" Komodo George spoke with pride.

"So are all the boats colourful like yours?" Clancy looked down at the little boat bobbing along behind them.

"See for yourself." Komodo George brought their attention to a large boat which was fast appearing on the horizon. It was hard to judge from that distance but it looked close to 100 feet long with enormous red and white sails billowing above it. As the boat got closer they could see the enormous carved eye at the bow. The ship slid across the water with ease.

The boat was ahead of them by a mile or so and they guided their own boat in to follow it. The light was soon gone completely and Grudaire and George began to discuss the stars. Degore listened with interest and tried to memorise the locations and directions they spoke of. He almost forgot the smoked wallaby that he was eating for what felt like the thousandth time in a row.

The gentle rocking of the boat pulled Degore and Clancy to sleep. Now, after spending so long in the heat, it was less uncomfortable for them. The claggy humidity had been left behind as they drew away from the land, and now on open sea with the stiff breeze it was more pleasant.

The next morning Degore woke up before Clancy for once. A city, set on the side of a hill, rose up before them. Degore's eyes were drawn up to the golden statue that stood at the top, it stood head and shoulders above the stately columned building that stood a little to its left. It took the form of an extraordinarily well-built man, quite bare of clothing apart from his winged helmet. Degore felt that was a bit inappropriate and told Clancy so as he struggled out of his blanket.

The first thing Clancy saw that morning was the naked loins of a statue and he informed Degore that this was not good for his health.

The boys took in the city in amazement. There seemed to be columns everywhere and the white buildings glowed in the morning sun. The red tiled roofs added charm to the city which seemed to be formed of house stacked upon house, all the way up the sides of the hill. It was a natural harbour, sheltered on the south by generations worth of housing rubble, dead ships and boulders, and the gentle slopes of the other side were covered in vineyards. The big ship they had been following was now amongst many others of its size and all around them were small fishing vessels headed out to sea. Some were wooden and some looked like bundles of reeds strapped together.

They were soon in the bay and moored beside the big ship. The morning sun cast a shadow across the bay from the white stone lighthouse that stood majestically on the south arm of the harbour. The harbourmaster was standing before their boat as if he had just manifested there. He took their payment with gruff professional manners, and after receiving it became pleasant and jovial.

"Strangers to these parts?" he said—it was more of a statement than a question—as he surveyed Clancy, his shoes on now that they were far away from the sand, with his shirt crisp and his hat clean.

Grudaire grinned. "Yes, bringing the boys out to see the world."

The harbourmaster laughed heartily. "I have met your order before..." He trailed off as his eyes took in the small red and green boat which Degore and Clancy were hauling ashore. "Is the owner of the boat aboard?" he inquired, as if trying to restrain concern and remain professional.

George sprang from behind the mast where he had been muttering over his vellum and leapt out of the boat. He grasped the man in a great bear hug. The two

held a quiet conversation for a short time and then the harbourmaster whistled and some buff men came over. He asked them to bring his father's little red and green boat ashore and then, after wishing the party a good stay, headed off to collect fees from others.

George invited them round to his house. His son's wife managed a few rooms for lodgers, and it was the least he could do to return the kindness after his rescue. Like most houses in the city, it was whitewashed with hordes of flowers in window baskets and pots.

As there were three of them they would have a room to themselves. Komodo George called his daughter-in-law as she entered the house. Mariella was cute and shy, pregnant with her first child. She carried a basket of orange fruits of different sizes. She was happy to see them and invited them to sample the oranges. Komodo George carved them open and Mariella brought a small clay vessel and set it in the middle of the table.

A slice was handed to Clancy and he bit into it. He chewed with a look of confusion.

Mariella laughed: a sweet, gentle laugh. "You eat the flesh, not the skin." She took the segment from Clancy and peeled away the outer layer. Tossing it into the vessel, she handed back the inner section. "Now it will taste better."

Clancy swallowed the sweet and zesty mouthful and gingerly sampled the inner section. Delight spread across his face.

Degore smirked and quickly peeled the piece he was holding. "So what are these called?" he asked.

"Oranges, mandarins and grapefruits." Komodo George gobbled down a slice. "Aren't you having any?" He directed this to Mariella who was not eating anything.

"They make me feel a little ill," she said, indicating towards her belly. "My mother was like this too, you know."

Komodo George nodded sympathetically. "You women go through a lot, I admire it." He smiled as his eyes listlessly stared out across the whitewashed courtyard at some peony growing in an urn. "I remember when my beloved was pregnant with Basil, she once ate an orange with olive oil drizzled over it."

Mariella laughed, "Yes, I saw her doing that once when she was ill, she said it made her feel better."

A faint smile flitted across Komodo George's face for a moment. Then he jumped up. "I need to wash," he announced to his guests. "You can come with me to the bathhouse, if you wish."

They left Mariella slicing vegetables at the window, with a magnificent view over the sea and the road her husband would soon be taking up the hill for lunch.

The bathhouse was cleaner and less populated than the one in the port city of Llyme, with its plain

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whitewashed walls and scrubbed pavers. Degore went from tan to white after he was done scrubbing, and Grudaire's beard was a shinier shade of grey by the time they were preparing to leave. Even Komodo George had undergone a transformation: his heavily tanned feet were still calloused, but looked clean now.

The party made their way up the hill towards the house and met Basil the harbourmaster, who was striding home for his midday meal.

He was surprised that the strangers he met that morning were now his lodgers, but then he laughed. "I should have guessed that father would bring you home."

Back at the house, Grudaire took a quick nap—a power nap as he liked to call it—before lunch was ready. Degore was worrying over the newly sprouting fluff on his chin, and Clancy was pestering George with questions about how he was to do his laundry.

Basil, who was doing carrying jobs for his wife and working himself up over her condition, informed him that one coin would get his things washed when the washerwoman came by their house on the morrow.

Komodo George was glad to be free of such discussions and began to inform all present about his findings on dragons' neck muscles.

The lunch was good: bread, grilled vegetables drizzled with olive oil, and cheese. There was a bit of roast meat as well. The fresh food was delicious compared to the preserved food they had been subsisting on for most of their journey, but they tried to eat politely nevertheless.

Basil went off to work again and Mariella to have a nap. Komodo George and Grudaire had their heads bent over some musty books in the corner and the boys felt full of energy.

They went out onto the street, Clancy had tried to tell Grudaire where they were going but he was too busy with his books to pay much heed.

The streets were quiet and a cool sea breeze flowed smoothly through them. Trees lined the streets and unfamiliar flowers spilled out of pots and hanging baskets hung on house walls. The inhabitants were either sleeping or taking the hottest hours slowly, but these forest-dwellers were out to explore.

"Such a wonderful city!" Clancy exclaimed. "And such friendly people! Nothing could go wrong in a town like this! I think a wholesome environment brings out the best in people!"

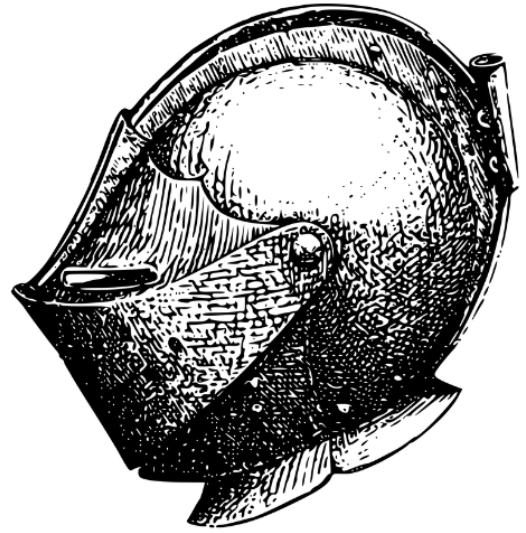
"Yes," Degore agreed. "Nothing could possibly go wrong here. I hope we can stay for a long time."

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# Hellalyle and Hildebrand

Story by unknown, translated by Whitley Stokes.  
Painting by Burton *Meeting on the Turret stairs*



She sat in her bower, with eyes of flame,  
(My sorrow is known to God alone.)  
Bending over the broidery frame,  
(And oh there liveth none to whom my sorrow may be told.)  
And where the red gold ought to shine,  
She broiders there wi' the silken twine.  
And where the silken twine should be,  
She lays the golden broiderie.  
In they come to the Queen so fair:--  
'Proud HELLA so wildly is broidering there.'  
The Queen she wrapt her furs around:  
Strode on till HELLALYLE she found.  
'Hearken, HELLA, with speed you sew,  
But all astray your needl doth go.'  
'Ah well my needl may go astray,  
For I am lost in woe for aye.

My father was lord of the land by his sword,  
And knights of renown were the slaves at his board.  
My father gave me a glorious guard:  
Twelve noble knights were my watch and ward.  
Eleven daily served me well,  
But oh, I loved the last -- I fell.  
My true-love's name was HILDEBRAND,  
And he was Prince of Engelland.†  
Scarce came to my bower that knight so bold,  
When all was to my father told.  
Oh if you heard my father's shout --  
"Champions! on with your armour stout!  
See that your swords and shields be right,  
HILDEBRAND, he is a lord of might."

They stood at the door with spear and shield:  
"Up, Lord HILDEBRAND! out and yield!"  
He kissed me then mine eyes above:--  
"Say never my name, thou darling love."  
Out of the door Lord HILDEBRAND sprang;  
Around his head the sword he swang.  
In gore they soon were lying there,  
My seven brothers with golden hair.



My youngest brother was battling near,  
And O in my heart I held him dear.  
And so I screamed, "Lord HILDEBRAND,  
For GOD's dear love now hold thy hand!  
O let him live -- my youngest brother,  
He'll bear the tidings to my mother."  
And, while I spake Lord HILDEBRAND,  
With eight wounds sunk upon the sand.

My brother bound me by the hair:  
I hung at the heels of his frantic mare.  
There was not a stone, there was not a root,  
But I left it a piece of my shattered foot.  
There was not a bough we passed that day,  
But it tore a piece of my bosom away.  
The deep ice-rivers were red with gore,  
As over them we and the wild horse tore.

And when to the castle we came anigh,  
My mother stood in misery.  
My brother he built a tower strong,  
Sharp thorns he laid on the floor along.  
He stript me to my silken sark,  
He cast me on thorns so keen and stark.  
And, oh, wherever my hands were thrown  
The horrible thorns empierced the bone.  
And, oh, wherever I screaming stood,  
Their piercing daggers were dyed with blood.  
My brother wished me in the grave,  
My mother would sell me for a slave.  
And soon they sold me for a bell:  
In Mary's tower they hung it well.  
The bell rang out, and rang again:  
My mother's bosom brast in twain.'

Or ever she told of all her teen  
(My sorrow is known to God alone.)  
Dead she fell before the Queen.  
(And oh there liveth none to whom my sorrow may be told.)



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