

Full Circle

Monday, 11 October 2010

Last Updated Wednesday, 15 December 2010

Winner of the Silver for the 2010 Anniversary Literature Competition

Here's my entry for this year's Anniversary Literature Competition.

I see I may be the first to submit a piece, which may or may not be a good place to be in the queue.

However, I hope you enjoy the story, which is exactly 3,000 words long and features some regional dialectic dialogue that I hope you are able to follow (just think of Antonio Banderas as Puss in Boots in Shrek ...)

Sir Guy des Bontemps (aka Geoff Buss)

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From his perch up on a stout bough above the Loren Highway, Hethnidyl watched the solitary horseman as he slowly approached, apparently unaware of the half-elf's presence up in the mighty oak tree. Heth - for that was the name he used in human company - had made sure that the Bretonnian was unaccompanied before he'd decided to make his strike against the man. Ha! Rulin's class, my arse, he mused to himself as he waited to launch his assault on the unwary nobleman. He'd tracked the Bretonnian's leisurely progress through the forest's fringes, keeping his prey at a safe distance while he observed and followed him. Luck was with Heth since the noble was not wearing armour and rode armed only with a sword that hung carelessly from the ornate saddlebow. The man appeared to be dressed more for a banquet at Salignac La Rouge than for a solitary journey along the Loren track. Arrogant bastard, Heth thought. Typical of their kind. Think they can subjugate their subjects with their power and position. Them and their arrogant ways. I'm going to take your gorge, yer fancy bastard. Heth smiled to himself at the thought of plunging his dagger into the noble's throat, and smiled even more so at the thought of the rich pickings that his victim would most likely be carrying in his purse and saddlebags. When the moment was right, Heth launched himself from the bough as the rider came level with his position above the track-way. The nobleman's hand flew to the hilt of the sword hanging from the saddle, but too late. He managed to half-draw the blade from its scabbard before the bandit hit him from above. Heth's attack took the Bretonnian off his horse and the two men fell to the ground; the impact softened for Heth as he landed on top of his victim. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately (depending on how one regards it), the fall instantly broke the noble's neck and so he neither felt nor was aware of his assailant's dagger blade as it slashed through his exposed throat with such violence that the nobleman's head was all but severed from the neck. Heth was quick and thorough in his search for items of value. Having cut his victim's purse free from its belt-mountings, he then stripped off the fine leather boots the dead rider wore; they'd fetch a good price if sold in the right place. The half-elven bandit turned his attention next to the horse, which casually stood grazing a short distance away. As Heth approached it, the horse regarded him with suspicion and snorted a warning. It wasn't enough to put the thief off his purpose, however. With almost lightning speed, Heth grabbed the reins of the horse and plunged his dagger into the side of its neck, severing its carotid artery. Pity to waste such a fine beast, he thought, but he knew he'd never be able to get away by selling it without immediately raising suspicion. Besides, the beast'd probably kick me to death if I tried to ride it, he reasoned. As it bled to death, the horse staggered and then sank its knees at which moment Heth was able to release his grip on the reins and quickly cut the saddlebags free before they could be trapped beneath the dying horse. The animal rolled onto its side with a last bubbling sigh, and as it did so, Heth managed to unhitch the Bretonnian's sword from the saddle. He'd find a ready market for such a well-forged weapon and could always sell the finely made scabbard and sword-belt separately to avoid prompting too many questions as to how he came to be in possession of such items. After quickly stowing the purse and boots in the saddlebags, he looped the sword-belt over his head and then hoisted the saddlebags onto his shoulder. He checked to make sure he'd gathered everything of worth before stealing away into the forest and making his way back towards the cave that served as his hide-away. Heth hated the Bretonnian nobles with good reason. His elven mother had been raped by one of their kind and he was the result of that violation. His mother had died, as much from the shame and humiliation of the act as from the physical trauma she had suffered at the birth of her half-human, half-elven baby. He had been raised in serfdom and had suffered more than most Bretonnian peasants due to his half-breed status; he was regularly cursed, beaten and humiliated by the members of the Bretonnian elite and fared little better at the hands of the peasantry. As soon as he was able, he had fled to the relative safety of the Loren forest, where he had thought he would find sanctuary among his mother's kind, the wood elves, only to find that, although tolerated, he was generally regarded with distrust and disdain by most of the forest folk he met. In short, he was an outcast and, as such, forced into a life of banditry in order to survive. At first, Heth was reduced to living no better than an animal, scavenging for food and living in caves deep within the forest. However, as time passed, his elven heritage began to play an important part in how his skills developed, especially in hunting and surviving his arboreal environment. Eventually, he'd found a dry, spacious cave near a clear-running forest stream about a day's travel by foot from the southern edge of the Loren forest. It was from here that Heth

operated his solitary vendetta against the Bretonnian nobility who dared to travel along the Loren Highway. By the time the remains of Baron Salignac's son were discovered five days later, Heth was well on his way into Tilea to sell the items he'd accumulated from his latest crop of victims. It was the ornate saddle that provided the search party with the necessary evidence that the few scattered remains and tattered clothing were all that remained of the Baron's son; the wild creatures that dwelt along the forest's edge had ravaged the bodies of the murdered noble and his horse, leaving only an assortment of gnawed bones and rags in the general vicinity. The saddle and remnants were borne back to Salignac La Rouge with due haste and delivered to the Baron, who at first was grief-stricken by the discovery and then determined to hunt down the perpetrator; for the Baron's son was yet another member of Bretonnia's nobility to have either disappeared or been found murdered in the general locality. Initially, the wood elves were suspected as being the possible killers until someone pointed out that no arrows were found with any of the victims' remains. Beastmen were also ruled out because no remains would have ever been discovered if they were the killers. No, the killer had to be a bandit and most probably a member of the peasantry, because the victims were only ever Bretonnian nobles. Local peasants and possible suspects were rounded up and brought to the Baron for questioning; some were even put to torture to extract confessions. Orders were issued that no members of the Baron's retinue were to travel on any of the local roads and byways without an armed escort, and a reward was offered to anyone who could provide information that would lead to the capture of the killer. This last measure even led to a bout of false accusations by some of the local peasantry; it was, after all, a perfect opportunity to make a profit and settle scores with neighbours or unpopular members of the local community at the same time. All of which resulted in some miscarriages of justice and hangings of both innocent and guilty parties alike, and the eventual withdrawal of the reward. However, the killer was still no nearer to being caught. Heth meantime had arrived in Ravola, at the Tilean end of the Nuvolone Pass, where he made his way to a tavern by the town's market place. He'd been on the road for a good seven or eight days since he'd slain the lone Bretonnian nobleman, and now he needed to slake his thirst, fill his belly and maybe even find a wench for some entertainment, before bedding down for the night either at the inn or, if all its rooms were taken, in the hay-loft of its livery stables. He knew that he could always find folk who'd be ready to buy good quality Bretonnian items with few questions asked. Mercenaries and travellers, not unlike himself, frequented the inn or milled about the market square, looking for bargains; swords, scabbards, sword-belts, daggers, leather boots, gold or silver rings, and such like. Heth could haggle with the best of his prospective customers, and so he knew he would make a handsome sum of money from the sale of his stolen goods. He entered the tavern and made his way to a vacant table, where he dumped his heavy bundle of wares on the floor prior to slumping down into a sturdy wooden chair with arms and a high railed back. A few of the taproom's occupants eyed him over their tankards of ale with a mix of curiosity and suspicion, for it was obvious from Heth's appearance that he was a half-breed; part elf and part human. Heth defiantly returned their stares, silently challenging them until one by one they looked elsewhere or turned their attention back to the contents of their tankards. However, one man continued to study Heth before giving a discreet nod of acknowledgement or perhaps recognition, after which he rose from his chair and sauntered across the room to where Heth was seated. "Heth? No?" the stranger enquired as he sat down at the table without invitation. "Ev no zeen you for zome time. Ev you been travellin'?" he continued. Heth regarded him silently for a minute or so, before responding, "Might be, but don't recollect who yer be, no invitin' yer to join me." The stranger placed his tankard on the table while replying and extending his hand in friendship. Heth, "My name iz Falda. Falda Talizaro. A Ev met you in Ebino 'bout ten or eleven month pazt. You waz a zellin' r zauwd, zcabbid an' belt. They waz good quality. But they waz a ztole by zome baztid a few month pazt, but now maybe you zell me 'nother. Yez?" Heth was slow to accept Falda's hand at first, but eventually clasped it and nodded to the Tilean. "Yes, I 'member you now," he lied. Then continued, "An' I 'm sure I can sell you another good quality sheaf belt. But first I 'm in need o' a drink an' some food afore we start hagglin'." Then Heth looked expectantly suggested, "P'rhaps if you buy me a tankard or two o' ale an' a platter, I may be able to sell you somethin' o' sum o' money ..." Falda nodded, then turned and called to a serving wench who was refilling a customer's tankard from one of the huge barrels that stood in the taproom, "Eh! Luza! Bring zome ale an' food for my fren' here. An' another too, eh?" The wench looked across to Falda, regarded Heth for a moment or two and then nodded her acknowledgement to Falda's request. After a while, the serving wench arrived at their table carrying two pewter tankards filled to the brim with foaming ale and a wooden platter heaped with hot slices of meat, a hunk of coarse bread and some cheese. As she set the platter and tankards down on the table, she caught Heth's eye and gave him a knowing smile. Luza appeared taken with Heth's mixed racial looks and physical stature. He'd found his entertainment for later. "Yo'r food an' Luza said looking straight at Heth and giving him another sultry smile. Then she turned to Falda and held out her hand, demanding immediate payment for the food and drink. Falda took some copper and silver coins from his purse and gave them to Luza, while a brief conversation in Tilean took place between the two. Luza counted the coins, then satisfied she had not been cheated, she nodded to Falda, gave Heth another smile and sashayed away to serve some new customers who'd recently entered the taproom. "She a friend o' yours?" Heth enquired as he stabbed a slice of meat with his knife and nodded in the direction of the wench. "Ahh! You like Luza, eh? She, 'ow you zay, my couzine? On my mother's a friend of ...", but the Tilean was cut off by Heth, who responded, "Not int'ested in a history lesson, friend. Just wanted to know what was counted for, that's all." Falda pulled a face at Heth's interruption and said, "No, Luza iz no belong to anyone, all Heth managed to say before occupying himself with satisfying his hunger and thirst, and completely ignoring the Tilean. Finally, Heth mopped the platter clean of the meat juices with the last hunk of bread, then pushed the platter away, drained his tankard and rose from his chair. As he stooped to retrieve his bundle from the floor, the Tilean put his foot on the bundle and a restraining hand on Heth's arm, saying in an ominous tone, "No so fazt, fren'. I think we ev unfinish biz'nezz ... I pay for you'r food an' drink on the un'erztan' in you zell me 'nother zauwd an' prize, yez?" There was a tense silence as Heth met Falda's stare, gauging how seriously he should take the Tilean's menacing tone. Finally, Heth shook the Tilean's hand from his arm, and sat back down, saying, "Must o' slippa'."

friend. If youâ€™d take your boot off my bundle there, Iâ€™ll see what I can find fer you.â€• Heth bent and unlaced the bundle, took out several swords, scabbards and sword-belts and placed them all on the table for the Tilean to examine. Several other men in the taproom suddenly took an interest and came over to look at the wares Heth had to sell. This unwanted attention made the half-elf feel very uneasy. This was not what he had in mind when heâ€™d planned to sell his contraband in Ravola. One of the men whoâ€™d joined the throng, took a particular interest in the swords that were arrayed on the table. The man elbowed his way forward and, leaning across, studied each weapon in turn, then snatched up the sheathed sword and its attached belt, that until recently had belonged to Baron Salignacâ€™s son. Hethâ€™s blood ran cold as the man half-drew the sword from its scabbard and examined it closer by the light of a sconced candle, declaring, â€œEre! Whereâ€™er come by this, â€™alf-breed? Looks loike Bretonnian craftsmanship to me. Anâ€™ the toolinâ€™ on this scabbâ€™d anâ€™. These be too good fer a man-oâ€™-arms tâ€™be carryinâ€™. Oi reckon they belongâ€™d tâ€™a knoight or lord more loike. â€™ these, eh, â€™alf-breed?â€• All eyes turned on Heth, who was now trapped and surrounded by everyone whoâ€™d been in the taproom. There was nowhere for him to escape and no way he could fight his way out, even if he used one of the weapons now lying on the table before him. His mind raced as he frantically thought of some way he could extract himself from the situation. Before he could stop himself, he blurted, â€œSame way you would, my friend. I traded honestly for it anâ€™ all these others you see displayed on the tableâ€™, he lied. â€œI buy anâ€™ sell a variety oâ€™ wares, depending on supply anâ€™ demand oâ€™ the regions I find myself in, while on my travels.â€• To his relief, his bluff worked, for the man could agree that he would, of course, always trade honestly, but only after first having driven a hard bargain. This raised some derisive laughter from among the crowd and then suddenly Heth was being asked by one and then another for how much he would sell this sword for or that scabbard and belt, and the tension evaporated. Falda also drove a hard bargain and left the tavern having successfully secured the recently deceased Salignacâ€™s weapon, scabbard, sword-belt and boots for a heavily discounted sum. Heth left the tavern much later, accompanied by Faldaâ€™s cousin, Lusa. Hethâ€™s head swam somewhat from the effects of the extra ale heâ€™d consumed in celebration of his highly successful and lucrative trading that evening. He hoped that his inebriated state wouldnâ€™t spoil his intended fun with Lusa, once heâ€™d got her into the hay-loft above the tavernâ€™s livery stables.

As Heth stumbled his way into the shadowed entrance of the stables, Lusa stepped away from him. He turned to see where sheâ€™d gone and caught the faintest glint of a sword blade moments before it plunged into his guts. As he sank to his knees in pain and shock, Heth saw the profile of Falda Talizaro standing before him, holding the very sword heâ€™d bargained for that evening; next to Falda stood Lusa. The two Tileans watched Heth topple forward slowly, then roll over onto his side, still clutching his belly. While Hethâ€™s eyes glazed over and his last breath subsided, Talizaro retrieved the dying half-elfâ€™s purse and handed it to Lusa, saying, â€œHereâ€™s your payment for your part in catching the half-breed. I receive mine from Baron Salignac once I return his sonâ€™s possessions to him and provide proof his killer is dead.â€• With these words, Falda hacked off Hethâ€™s head and dropped it into a small sack heâ€™d brought with him for the purpose. Then the Tileans saddled two of the horses in the stable, mounted up and rode away towards the Nuvolone Pass. Â Â Â Â Â