

The Brave Maiden

A Verse Novel

Geoffrey Craig
P.O. Box 539
Great Barrington, MA 01230
U.S.A.

(413) 528-2642
geoffrey2@roadrunner.com

“Copyright 2008 Geoffrey Craig”

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

Preface

“The Brave Maiden” will be serialized quarterly in “Wilderness House Literary Review”. Should a reader miss an installment or wish to re-read an earlier chapter, the prior installments will be available in the magazine’s online archives.

I originally wrote “The Brave Maiden” as a Christmas present for my then eleven-year-old daughter. The genesis of the poem was a series of stories I had told my daughter a few years earlier. Not yet a writer and doubting my imagination, I borrowed from the Robin Hood legend changing, however, the protagonist to a young woman.

The poem is set in a Thirteenth Century England ruled by a wicked king who allows vile barons to run rampant. Mayhem prevails and true justice is non-existent. Among the worst of these barons was one Count Gerard who, while the Brave Maiden is on her morning ride, murders her reform-minded father and the rest of her family. Swearing revenge, she flees to the forest where her adventures begin as she seeks to bring peace, order and prosperity to the blood-soaked country.

A panoply of spirit folk and uniquely-endowed animals appear in the poem and play their parts alongside multifarious humans, some of whom bear resemblance to characters in the Robin Hood saga.

–Geoffrey Craig

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

V

The Twins

Of supple saplings, they had built a hut;
And this morning, she planned to figure what
Was needed to shelter the chestnut mare.
Animals she felt needed special care:
A thought oft unknown in that cruel age,
But one taught her by that most worthy sage,
Ormond, loyal teacher and trusted guide
Who often went on her fast morning ride.
He spoke of life's magic and mystery,
Of England's long and tragic history.

He always carried a fine, tempered sword
Though he was neither baron nor rich lord.
He could employ his sword to great effect;
But for books and laws, he had more respect.
He taught her to distinguish right from wrong.
Solace he found in the nightingale's song.
He warned her of England's perilous state
And the need somehow to escape this fate.
Grievously missing him as she wandered;
Has he met his death, she sadly pondered.

Jonah lost his smile when he heard the news;
For a moment, she thought he might refuse.
"Brave Maiden, we worked all day yesterday;
I had other plans in mind if I may.
The nearest village would suit rather well;
We shall return before the evening bell."
Added William, "I'll bring down a swift hind;
We've had no venison, need I remind."
She addressed them in a tone, grave and stern
Such as gave them each quite a nasty turn.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

"Tomorrow shall we explore our domain,
But not while more important tasks remain."
Chastened, they set to work on a shelter
Though their work was rather helter skelter.
They wove a rustic roof of tender boughs.
"Good enough," said Jonah, "For sheep or cows."
The roof was tightly fixed to solid trees,
The sides left open to the sylvan breeze.
Flame made no apparent complaint at all -
Though no resemblance to her castle stall.

Beneath her lean belly, Flame tucked her legs.
Building shelters, she thought, is fine but begs
The question of killing the evil count.
For that, we'll need much more than just one mount.
The Maiden was hard at target practice -
Relentless as in her thirst for justice.
She fitted an arrow to her drawn bow
And felt surging strength through her fingers flow.
Swift flew the arrow, but a hair breadth's wide,
Nicking towering Jonah in the side.

"Dear God in Heaven, now what have I done?
After a day's work in the glaring sun?"
"Fair shot, milady," shouted Will with glee.
"I would surely not be thine enemy."
"Oh dear," she said in a voice less than curt.
"I fervently pray that you are not hurt."
"Fear not, Brave Maiden. Nothing but a scratch.
'Twill heal nicely with a simple cloth patch.
And Will, shed none of your crocodile tears;
To feast and brawl, I have many more years.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

But I beg, Brave Maiden, for our own good
Practice a tad 'ere meeting Robin Hood."
"Now dost thou believe that old legend true?
Perhaps you believe in King Arthur too.
No shining Galahad will join our cause
To give England lasting peace and just laws.
Sustenance will come only from ourselves:
Neither from misty ghosts nor forest elves."
"But," cried William hoarsely, "We are but three."
"Not for long, friend William, as you shall see."

Next morning at sunup, they left the camp
With the grass still wet and their clothing damp.
Passing the thicket, she saw a bright flash
Of red as the smiling fox made a dash
For the woods, pausing just to wink at her.
It had luminous eyes and gleaming fur.
"Please wait," she called. "What does this really mean?
Are you something other than you would seem?"
The answer, sadly, she had sought in vain;
The wily fox ran down the wooded lane.

They heard just then furious shouts - and words
That stirred up flocks of angry, screeching birds.
Searching to see who would such turmoil raise,
They found a frantic scene that did amaze:
Two men with looks and dress identical
Hurling barbs in a way most comical.
"What sayest thou? Why you shall rue the day?"
"Christ and God's blood, now I shall make thee pay."
Seething with rage, they hefted wooden swords.
>From each of their belts hung several gourds.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

They each fought with truly consummate skill,
Cursing wildly as if ready to kill.
The fight was equal, and neither could win -
Nor commit that savage, Biblical sin.
The forest rang with tempestuous blows;
But at her commanding voice, both men froze.
They looked slowly around in shocked surprise
To see a maiden with fire in her eyes.
But what gave one a more violent start
Was the sharp arrow leveled at his heart.

"What misery, brother against brother -
Better far, the love they owe each other!
I bemoan these harsh times that are awry:
To witness such scenes and not wonder why."
"Milady, we simply love to duel;
Our bloody threats are but to play the fool."
"What brings two yeomen then so far a field?
Have you no budding crops whose fruited yield
Depends largely on your sweat-drenched labor
And whose wholesome bread you hope to savor?"

"We have of late from our homes been driven
And from our kinsmen cruelly riven.
Having twice been ravaged by Count Gerard,
Our scared villagers thought their fortunes marred.
Twins, like witches, they said, bring evil luck;
Grain withers on the stalk, and calves don't suck
Their mothers' milk." "The opposite I've heard,"
The Maiden said. "And find both views absurd.
Come proud twins; join us for a hearty meal.
Perhaps we can soon find you swords of steel."

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

VI A Fire

Joy-provoking Spring now burst all her bounds;
The forest overflowed with cheerful sounds.
Birds of varied stripe and hue roamed the sky
As anxious mothers taught their young to fly.
Newly horned bucks sprang over fallen logs;
Razor-tusked boars rooted in mossy bogs.
Foxes and wolves were on a deadly prowl,
Teaching young hunters with a muted growl.
Woodpeckers feasted on beetles and grubs;
Mother bears watched over rough-tumbling cubs.

The Maiden rode forth with her band of five;
Rarely had they felt more fully alive.
In the camp, they had continued to build;
Betimes, they joked, they would elect a guild.
They moved at a brisk pace, senses alert
For dangers to face, or perhaps, to skirt.
Each carried a bow slung across the back,
A score of arrows in a deerskin pack.
She rode in front, her auburn hair flowing,
Her head held high, her ruddy cheeks glowing.

Flame alone felt high-strung and oddly tense;
Trouble was brewing said her mare's sixth sense.
The mare snorted and shook her tangled mane;
The Maiden gently slackened her tight rein.
Selwyn, one brother, was cursing the pox
When the Maiden happened to see the fox.
Before she had time to react or speak,
The other twin sprang ahead like a streak;
And pointing to smoke darkening the sky,
Thin Egbert let out an ear-splitting cry.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

Across a small meadow dotted with sheep,
Far removed from manor or castle keep,
Stood a lonely, impoverished village
Which four vicious knights had come to pillage.
Spotting Gerard's coat of arms on a shield,
The Maiden spurred the mare across the field.
Bleating in fear, the sheep scattered and fled;
She let go the reins and gave Flame her head.
Arriving as a knight wrestled a goat,
She shot a barbed arrow straight through his throat.

"Practice makes perfect," said Jonah with glee,
Crippling a knight with a blow to the knee.
A third was tying grain sacks on his horse;
Selwyn and Egbert stopped him in mid-course.
As he reached to unsheathe his sword in vain,
They twisted his arms in hot, searing pain.
The fourth knight was beating a bent old man;
Flame managed to kick him right in the can.
Releasing the knights sans weapons or steeds,
She advised them to forego evil deeds.

"Tell your master that before very long,
His cunning head will not be worth a song.
Justice, order and peace shall England see,
I swear by God for all eternity."
"Who are you?" inquired a knight in dismay.
"The Brave Maiden gave thee justice this day,"
Replied William in stentorian tones.
"Now remove your friend and bury his bones."
The spreading fire took all morning to quench;
They held their noses from the smoke and stench

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

Of charred goose feathers and smoldering thatch.
"How," she asked, "Did your forlorn village catch
The attention of Gerard's brutal fiends.
To speak the truth, you have barely the means
To sustain yourselves." "Our unpaid taxes
Brought them here with swords and battle axes."
"You shall have my protection! Now farewell."
I wonder, thought Flame, how in holy hell,
She will make that outrageous promise stick.
Is anyone else not completely thick?

They rode calmly, four horses to the good,
Laughing and rejoicing, as well they should.
The twins, suitably armed with well-honed swords,
Were eager to fight any heathen hordes.
As the bright afternoon began to wane,
A spunky village lad caught them and fain
Would add his strong arm to their noble band.
Smiling, she extended a welcome hand.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

VII Recruits

As dramatic tales of their exploits spread,
And highwaymen began to live in dread;
Her audacious band saw its fortunes grow,
Proving anew that ye reap as ye sow.
Two infamous robbers caught in the act,
With the flats of broadswords were soundly whacked.
With this wise sentence, they were so impressed
That they pleaded to join - who could have guessed.
A scoundrel, though, who murdered for a fee;
She hung by the neck from a live oak tree.

Merchants he had terrorized for ages -
Leaving a trail of blood and outrages.
Long a vassal of Philip the Cruel
(Whose domains lived under barbarous rule),
He earned from his master a rich tribute
By killing those who would not contribute
What Phillip demanded for protection.
Those few that ignored the implication
Paid a price that was exceedingly high:
Widows and orphans left to mourn and cry.

Thus a double profit was provided:
Gold for his coffers, subjects divided
By anguish and shame and so twice oppressed.
Against both body and soul, he transgressed.
Thinking only of gold, banquets and hawks;
Philip held to the rule that money talks.
Daily feasting on sumptuous repasts,
His love of cruelty went unsurpassed.
Copious wine gave him a bulbous nose;
He was schooled in neither rich verse nor prose.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

Cringing servants quaked if he looked askance;
To do someone ill, he ne'er missed a chance.
His vast belly round as a washing tub;
He had his pate, with oil, a servant rub.
In short, he was not a good man to mock;
He would rob a man down to the last frock.
The murderer was caught in a tavern
On the high road near the town of Malvern.
Witnesses and jury were common folk;
Pronouncing sentence, with fierce pride she spoke.

Daring women and men flocked to her side
As such bold deeds became known far and wide.
They came from all regions and walks of life,
Hoping to end England's blood-thirsty strife:
Desperate peasants deprived of their land
By corrupt earls who with steel-fisted hand
Evicted serfs who had long paid their dues
In favor of those with nothing to lose
By offering to pay a few pence more
To harrow the fields and sleep on the floor;

An apprentice sick of his leather guild -
Full of importance and rather self-willed -
Whose harsh master beat him once too often,
Fleeing in rage from what seemed a coffin;
A youthful cobbler with his fill of shoes -
So wretched that boredom caused him to choose
To leave his dreary bench and tools behind
And seek what high adventures he could find.
Some came with motives pure and others mixed,
But each of them knew something must be fixed.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

Annabelle was a painter of renown;
Her pictures commanded more than a crown.
One day as she put the final touches
On a portrait of a haughty Duchess,
She heard the Duke boast to a meek vassal:
“Their heads will top the walls of a castle,
And that will teach this Maiden to meddle
And impertinent justice to peddle.”
Annabelle, with a gasp, set down her brush
And left, without thought, the room in a rush:

Pausing only to spit on the portrait
Though her fee, and head, would now go forfeit.
She had heard, of late, the common folk talk
Of a Brave Maiden who had yet to balk
At using her potent sword or longbow
To protect the weak or oppose a foe.
Annabelle proudly came from humble stock;
Her father, a freeman, kept a small flock
Of sheep and nimble goats for wool and meat.
At the market, her mother took a seat

And sold whatever their holdings produced:
Her profits handsome though greatly reduced
By taxes and the High Sheriff’s demands.
The country abounded with greedy hands
To steal the ripened fruits of honest toil -
Earned by rank sweat from the richly dark soil.
By her mother’s stool, she began to draw:
Her portraits limned always without a flaw.
She astounded the townsfolk one and all
Who took to standing near the market stall.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

Her talent would have surely gone to waste
But for a wise woman with wealth and taste
Who saw a drawing of her kitchen maid
And provided lessons - expenses paid.
Annabelle studied from dawn until dusk;
The master's manner was quiet but brusque.
Annabelle acquired the painter's technique:
How to flatter and turn fat into sleek.
To wealthy merchants, she charged a fat fee;
Her poor peasant friends, she painted for free.

She galloped away with her eyes ablaze -
Emotions whirling, her mind in a daze.
How to find the Maiden she had no clue;
But, without pausing, she knew what to do.
She rode through fields and along muddy tracks
And slept on the floors of cold, peasant shacks.
She told her hosts the news that she carried,
And they all said wise not to have tarried.
Alongside the paths, serfs pointed the way,
Calling God bless and bowing heads to pray

That the Maiden she would reach with good speed -
Whose life might now hang by a slender reed.
Nearing the immense forest of Blaxford;
Of the Maiden, none had recently heard
Or knew how to find her wide-roaming band.
Annabelle feared they had fled this fair land
Of forested hills and broad, green meadows
Dotted with fat sheep and lined with hedgerows
Whose ripe buds now shone in all their glory.
What if swift time had stolen her story?

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

Thinking perhaps that she was not trusted,
She found an inn with its doorknob rusted.
The air was thick, the ceiling black from smoke.
A rough-clad barmaid went over to poke
The embers into flames, her greasy cap
Askew. One eye socket veiled by a flap
Of skin caused Annabelle to start in fear.
“Why, whatever could be the matter, dear?
Have you never seen such a rare beauty?”
Agreeing from her keen sense of duty,

Annabelle inquired of the Maiden’s camp.
“Who wants to know: a nonsensical tramp
Of a girl seeking adventure and fun,
Who, at the first clash of steel, will then run
To hide her ostrich-like head in the sand?
Now wouldn’t that sight be awfully grand?”
Annabelle wept, swore an oath, and pleaded -
Until convinced, the one-eyed maid ceded
And told of a path with nary a trace.
“How will I be sure when I reach the place?”

The barmaid smirked: “The camp is well-hidden.
No one enters there who is not bidden.”
Annabelle nodded and started to leave
When an evil-smelling drunk grabbed her sleeve.
“Come grace my lap; now there’s a pretty lass.”
She cried out in horror: “Please let me pass.”
The barmaid roughly knocked him to the floor
And, winking, led Annabelle out the door.
Annabelle rode for two days and a night,
Until halted by an amazing sight.

Almost hidden behind a pile of rocks,
Annabelle swore she saw a smiling fox.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

VIII Sarah

Though heartily welcomed into the fold,
Annabelle's news left the Maiden's eyes cold.
" We have now a cause - justice - that we serve;
And from this mission, we shall never swerve
Until peace reigns once more in this rich land.
It is on this ground that we make our stand:
The peasant unafraid shall tend his farm;
The saintly pilgrim travel free from harm;
The merchant fairly taxed pursue his trade;
The market woman in true coin be paid.

Only blind has justice any true worth,
Favoring neither high nor humble birth.
Princesses and dukes must merit respect;
Their duty, at their peril, they neglect.
With nobility comes obligation;
To serve is the noblest occupation.
Sound laws, by the King, must be well enforced;
And they must, by the barons, be endorsed.
The King shall abandon his greedy ways,
Or see counted the number of his days.

Your worrisome report leaves me unfazed;
Were the Duke other, I would be amazed.
Consider perhaps to best use your time
Not gilding a painting, but fighting crime."
"I would fain, Brave Maiden, lay down my paints
To acquire the hard skill of thrusts and feints.
But could not this artist in truth surmise -
To both paint and fight would be worldly wise?
And if I could please be so bold to ask
If to common folk you assign a task

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

In this government of justice and law?
If not, therein lies a most fatal flaw."
"Indeed commoners must play their own part;
Or even good laws, they take not to heart.
I know not how this can be quickly done;
First, crimson battles must be fought and won.
On the morrow, you begin your training;
We would start now, but the day is waning.
We train daily with longbow, sword and lance;
Thus we leave nothing to pitiless chance,

We study tactics and war's history.
We have as well a fledgling armory
Where our weapons we fashion and refine.
With arms, yon Jonah is like a gold mine.
Now, gold coin is something we sorely lack;
Without which, we take a different tack.
We have long lists of goods we need to buy;
Countless provisions are in short supply.
We need ground wheat and rye to bake our bread;
We eat roast game and bake wild grains instead.

For shields and armor, we lack plates of steel;
Sometimes it all makes my head spin and reel.
To sew new outfits, we need bolts of cloth;
To think, but not to act, would make me wroth.
I know impatience is a deadly sin;
But at times, I wonder where to begin.
The cobbler is working a damaged hide;
Good Jonah assures me God will provide.
But you have journeyed very long and hard;
So this conversation, we shall retard

Until you have eaten and rested well.
I shall talk with thee at the morning bell."

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

The camp rose with the dawn and set to work;
There were none who even wanted to shirk.
Cheerfully, they greeted one another.
For victory, they must help each other.
Will, the yeoman's son, taught the archer's skill,
The quarreling twins how with swords to kill.
Mock wooden knights were used as practice foes
That splintered and fell under savage blows.
Jonah sweated at a hot, rustic forge;
On succulent game, he still yearned to gorge.

The Maiden that morning, rode out alone.
To melancholy, she was rarely prone;
But today she had need of solitude
To think clearly and plan with fortitude.
Resting on a rock by a quiet stream,
She mused while watching a silvery bream.
She smelt in the air wild, tangy onions
And longed for more than loyal companions.
Gentle Will, she knew, loved her with passion;
In turn, she could but offer compassion.

Just then, she felt a breeze mussing her hair
And a cold presence disturbing the air.
She looked around and saw before her eyes
A vicious, snarling wolf - monstrous in size.
Flame, with her sword fastened to the saddle,
Had strayed. No sword would fight in this battle.
From her belt hung the dagger with the crest:
Not nearly enough, even at her best.
The huge wolf growled fiercely and bared its teeth.
The Maiden trembled like an autumn leaf,

But a dim memory rose in her mind.
She reached into her leather pouch to find

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

The mysterious coin of strange design.
She held it high up so the light could shine
On its mystic symbols and worn surface.
The wolf, in an instant, changed its purpose
And crawled towards her with an abject mien -
A more astounding sight she had ne'er seen.
The tamed wolf licked her hand and laid its head
Across her lap while she caressed the dread

Creature between the ears. As in a trance,
She spoke softly – struck by this happenstance.
“This is a phenomenon passing strange:
To see a fearsome brute so quickly change
Into a fawning creature mild and meek.
I would we had a common tongue to speak.
I know not what power brought you to me;
But from now on: Sarah, your name shall be.
At this moment, the grazing mare appeared;
And sensing the wolf, on her hind legs reared.

“Fear not, Flame, we have found a welcome friend;
So calm yourself and let us homeward wend.”
A hungry wolf, thought Flame: a friend indeed!
Those razor teeth are what we really need!

IX

A Troublesome Knight

Spirits high, she rode joyfully for home;
Sarah took to the fragrant woods to roam.
Slender blue bells had sprouted everywhere
While sweet honeysuckle perfumed the air.
Summer reigned in each clearing and bower
Where drone bees dashed from flower to flower.
Honey, she thought, would be a handsome treat
And make withal a slice of bread complete.
So thinking, she uttered a troubled sigh;
We'll certainly procure gold by and by.

Passing through the forest from north to south,
The highroad ended at a river mouth.
This well-worn thoroughfare lay near her way.
Outlaws abounded with old debts to pay
(Including one whose thumb was newly gone -
Caught red-handed by the Maiden at dawn
Stealing a family's last bag of grain.
Lucky indeed for him he was not slain.)
And hoping to profit from misfortune.
She drew nigh this wide road with due caution.

>From the road arose a fearsome medley
Of sounds: a fight that looked to be deadly.
She saw a young knight with thick, tousled hair
Hurling outrageous taunts into the air
And wielding his sword with broad, sweeping arcs
Against six men who bore the bloody marks
Of fierce combat on every cloak and limb.
Yet the prospects of his winning seemed slim.
The six men rode laden with bulging sacks
Fixed snugly with straps on their chargers' backs.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

The Maiden galloped right into the fray,
Never one to let odds get in her way.
Thrusting with her sword, she unhorsed a foe.
The knight laughed, "How a merry wind doth blow
'Twixt that varlet's ass and his saddle seat."
He landed a charging knight at his feet.
The woods rang with the din of steel on steel;
For quarter, there was no point to appeal.
The knight suffered a slight gash on one arm;
The Maiden's face showed excessive alarm.

"Fear not, 'tis but a harmless, piddling wound;
But lay on hard, fair maid, or we are doomed.
And pray, what makes a gentle maid so bold;
Are you after Gerard's ill-gotten gold?"
The Maiden stayed her hand in complete shock.
"Beleaguered knight, dost thou so often mock?
I joined this hot fight with but one concern;
Six against one is hardly a fair turn."
These words did not cause her bright, blushing cheek;
Of other thoughts, she did not choose to speak.

Instinct made her wheel in time to parry
And lunge forward hard enough to carry
Her terrified opponent from the field.
Her powerful strike cut in half his shield.
"In that case, once these fetid villains flee,
Take the honor; and leave the gold to me."
"But gold," she cried, "Will satisfy our needs.
And justice requires more than noble deeds."
Two Gerard lackeys now each aimed a lance
At the Maiden who hardly stood a chance

'Til her assailants froze dead in their tracks,
And the hair stood straight up on their scarred backs

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

At a sight neither really cared to see
And that just about caused them both to pee.
Sarah emitted a deep, frightening growl
And bared her fangs in a furious scowl.
She was the biggest wolf they could conceive;
They moved not a step and could scarcely breathe.
Sarah leapt, and a fulsome spurt of blood
Poured forth from the knave in a scarlet flood

As she spliced an artery in his neck.
He fell dead to the ground, a twitching wreck.
His comrade ran howling in mad disgrace,
A mark of horror engraved on his face.
The final two varlets in terror fled,
Leaving on the wooded road, three knaves dead.
As the weary knight fought to stem his fears,
The Maiden scratched Sarah between her ears.
"Is this a wolf, a dog or a demon?
The latter, I would think, to see them run."

"Nothing more than a common wolf is she -
But one who seems exceeding fond of me."
She grinned and gently rubbed the antique coin.
The knight buckled his sword around his groin.
"Against great odds, thou hast seen some service;
Wilt thou as well serve the cause of justice?"
She felt, with this question, her heart compress;
And feelings stir that she would not confess.
Suppressing these thoughts, she surveyed the scene,
Then turned to face him with a sterner mien.

"I thank thee kindly - a worthy offer;
But I would prefer to fill my coffer
With the fruits of Gerard's ill-gotten gains,
For which, we have gone to substantial pains."

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

“Hast not a knight some more noble design
Than stealing gold no matter how condign
The loss to that most foul, barbarous earl?
Sir, play not the part of a low-born churl.”

“Now, my maid, wherein lies the difference?
Because you claim your theft in reverence

To the glory of some higher calling?
Rotten curs there are aplenty, bawling
Out their bulging eyes in a fiery Hell
Who, on any Sunday, your tale would tell.
I, myself, was raised as an honest knight,
Amidst gracious acres – a most welcome sight.
God had blessed our smiling, fertile treasure
With sunshine and rain in equal measure.
Our granaries were plentifully stuffed,
The peasants’ cheeks and bellies nicely puffed.

The village held a merry springtide dance,
And love caught fire with a mere passing glance.
Storehouses are now bare, cornstalks blighted;
The people’s lives barren and benighted;
And hunger rules supreme where laughter reigned.
To serve your great cause would for me seem feigned.
The seeds of despair, Count Gerard has sown;
With this gold, I recover but our own.
Yet, thou art a brave, impetuous lass.
I would not leave thee with an empty glass

(Nor forswear the considerable help
Of your sword arm and that over-sized whelp).
So in equal parts, we shall share the gold
And in fond remembrance, this day shall hold.”
The Maiden’s eyes now shone with a new light:
“Thy sorrowful tale makes me feel contrite

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

And reminds me of others that I know.
What you propose is fair, so let us go
Our separate ways and in God's own time,
May our kingdom at last be free of crime.

Of today's work, I have but one remorse:
Three slain men who only served a vile, coarse
Master and so did not deserve to die."
"Over such knaves, you have no need to cry.
Their sharp falchions they put to wicked use,
And they were widely known for their abuse
Of the wise, antique customs of our shire.
Yet I will build them a funeral pyre;
Or rather, see to it that graves be dug,
Then toast their going with a brimming mug."

Homeward the Maiden rode sadly oppressed
Despite with gold and two new horses blessed.
Heavy were her thoughts and not less her heart;
>From that tousled knight, she was loath to part.
The big wolf gamboled cheerfully behind,
And the dark cloud soon lifted from her mind.
She tingled with glee at the camp's surprise:
To return with a wolf and golden prize,
Having left for a simple morning ride
And now richly dowered like an earl's bride!

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

X

The French Student

Verdant summer, in slow steps, turned to fall.
Will patiently followed the wild duck's call
And brought to camp many a tasty dish;
Venison was still Jonah's fervent wish.
Nights were chilly as the days grew shorter.
Around the bright fires, a pint of porter
Accompanied ancient tales and good cheer.
The Maiden allowed each a mug of beer.
With Jonah and Annabelle, she - for hours -
Spoke of strategies and the due powers

That adhere to king or nobility.
That a balance was needed she could see.
But how, wisely, to make it come to pass?
And what role for the growing merchant class?
With the gold, they were now well-provisioned
To fight the hard war she had envisioned
Would bring her sacred quest to victory.
Though in her ranks were knights of chivalry;
Of tough, seasoned fighters, she had but few.
And something else, she felt, was missing too.

As reports of her cause had grown and spread,
And rumor upon truth had amply fed,
Ardent men and women of every stripe
Were drawn to her as to Saint Patrick's pipe.
She promised them neither profit nor loss
But asked each to swear by the Holy Cross
To fight for justice, order and reform
And hold to the course no matter the storm.
The camp sounded like a festive beehive;
What a glorious time to be alive!

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

The twins one day went for a woodland walk,
Seeking no doubt a quiet place to talk
About their practice with the battle axe.
“Let’s see how our Sir Percival reacts
When we display for him our new routine.
‘Twill be the best by far he’s ever seen.”
Percival was a well-reputed knight;
The twins had despised this oaf at first sight.
He had recently joined her retinue
And often told the Maiden what to do.

Self-important in martial history,
He held forth at length on its mystery
With frequent tales of the war-like Roman.
He told her how best to site her bowmen.
On the use of horse, he explicated.
His sanguine exploits, he replicated.
He had won every battle of the age.
His feats of arms were difficult to gauge.
He told Jonah how armor should be made;
His lustrous fame would clearly never fade.

He was quite a tall and gangly fellow,
With a pimply nose and cheeks of yellow.
He belched and snored out loud at every mass;
The twins took him for an egregious ass.
The Maiden heard his remarks politely,
Then his wise counsel ignored forthrightly.
Jonah nodded as if deep in some prayer,
Then responded with a serious air:
“A most excellent point: if pigs could fly;
I wager thou wouldst make a fine rabbi.”

Recalling this, Selwyn rocked with laughter:
“May Sir P soon pee in the hereafter.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

At the word, 'rabbi', didst thou see his face?
Sir P a Jew: dear God, what a disgrace!"
Giggling, Egbert fell in a pile of leaves:
"For fun though, nothing beats those greedy reeves
Who complain and holler at being fleeced.
They are merely from guilt being released!
Their money goes to feed the luckless poor -
And to buy scarce provisions, to be sure."

Annabelle is charged with buying supplies.
In the market, she must watch out for spies
Since Gerard seeks the camp - so far in vain.
No serf will tell despite the cruel pain
That Gerard's vicious knights love to inflict.
The time approaches for mortal conflict.
The Maiden trains hard her growing forces -
Both on foot and mounted on their horses.
Her men and women are in fighting trim
And plan to hang Gerard from a high limb.

The twins soon found a secluded meadow
And rested by an overgrown barrow,
The grave of a hero from ancient times -
Gone ere his brave tale could be writ in rhymes.
Talking in the noonday sun; sleep, like death,
Arrived unannounced. Just a supple breath
Escaped their parted lips while inside boiled
Unforeseen passions: untamed and unspoiled
That might explode someday in vengeful rage
To alter the course of this anguished age.

So securely did sleep now enfold them
That had a grinning sprite whispered: "Ahem"
For sleeping when the whole world was teeming,
That merry fay would have found them dreaming -

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

Undisturbed by a cheerful, manly voice
Singing as if the forest should rejoice
At serenading in such fine fashion -
And rendered with so much verve and passion
That his chorale he thought a gracious boon.
Too bad he was completely out of tune.

The songbirds ceased their chattering chorus
And listened as if to lines from Horace.
Two cavorting swallows paused in mid-flight;
Two hares and a wry mole ducked out of sight.
A fey roebuck and doe stared in wonder,
As if rapt by distant peals of thunder.
Were his plainsong not enough to bemuse,
Add to it his habit of brilliant hues.
His coat was dazzling in its varied sheen.
His leggings were of scarlet and dark green -

In colors alternating for both legs.
>From his pommel hung a basket of eggs.
He held his seat with a high-born swagger;
He wore, in his belt, a crested dagger.
His singing, at long last, the twins awoke.
They thought at first it must be a bad joke:
A wraith braying in a concocted tongue.
They then were sure the Doomsday bell had rung.
"What fiend is making this caterwauling?"
"Only a madman could cause such bawling!"

The singer rode into the verdant field,
And, noticing the twins, to them appealed:
"Pardonnez-moi, je suis un peu perdu."
Their eyes bulged as if they had seen a gnu:
"Art thou a man or some magical beast?
Thy clothes to our eyes are a wondrous feast,

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

But thy words most preposterous and weird.
Thou cast on us a curse, we are afeard."
"Ah, mais certainment, you must me excuse;
It was neither a curse nor wicked ruse.

I sometimes forget to speak in anglais;
I am French and was thus speaking francais."
"While," said Egbert, "He now speaks normally,
His apparel is an anomaly."
"Where," asked Selwyn, "Did you learn that odd word?"
"At supper ... the Maiden ... I overheard ..."
"The Maiden," broke in the Frenchman with glee.
"It is she whom I came from France to see.
In this dense forest, I had lost my way.
If thou leads me to her, I will thee pay."

These welcome words got their full attention,
And they both concurred without abstention
To serve as guides for this peacock from France.
Their meager fee they asked for in advance.
"But tell us, dear friend, how we may thee call."
"In French, my proper name is Pierre of Gaul."
"Why then follow us, our good pee in air.
If thou canst learn to fight near half as fair
As hast conquered French with proper accent,
Our time and thy money are aptly spent."

The Maiden gaped at this startling vision.
Annabelle shook her head in derision.
Jonah chortled and tugged at his full beard
While several of the lads smirked and jeered.
Fashion in camp ran to dull, somber shades;
Such eye-popping splendor was for coy maids.
The women fighters all dressed simply too.
The Maiden had warned the band to eschew

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

The multi-hued plumage to which aspired
Parvenu earls – and was at court required.

A hard-muscled young lad stood in Pierre's way
And inquired if the clown would care to play
At swords - perhaps dancing were more his style.
The callow youth then flashed an evil smile,
And two other lads begged to have a go.
Pierre quite calmly said that he hoped to show
Such courtesy as he was always taught
That he even owed to scum. Now he sought
To chide them, not singly, but together
Since their swords would sting much like a feather.

Three mortal blades flashed in the autumn sun,
But Pierre laughed as if it were just good fun.
The forest resounded with clashing steel
And brutish grunts that made one's blood congeal.
Sword whirling as if of its own accord,
Pierre acted as if he were slightly bored
As he pinned one fellow against a tree
And calmly felled another with his knee.
With the third, he traded bone-crushing blows;
The cheering audience was on their toes.

The Maiden was suddenly heard to shout:
"Stop right now: enough of this foolish bout.
Fighting we shall have in great abundance.
This is a command I shall give but once."
The two fighters froze their swords in mid-stroke,
Like schoolboys caught in a practical joke.
Eyeing each other in wary silence,
They knew not how to end the violence
When Mathew grasped Pierre with both bearish paws.
"My skilled friend!" he exclaimed. "We all have flaws.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

I am known for a too ready temper -
Always ready to holler 'sic semper'.
You, in contrast, have a clear, steady mind
But must, perforce, be wholly color blind."
The four combatants then hugged each other,
And Pierre was proclaimed as a true brother
Who needed only a new set of clothes.
Like the phoenix, a brand new man arose.
He greeted the Maiden, bowing with grace.
A look of surprise spread across her face.

"The crested dagger that you boldly wear -
So like mine own that they make a fine pair.
Came it in your possession honestly -
And I charge thee answer right modestly;
Or didst thou obtain it through thievery
Or some other form of skullduggery?"
"Why dear cousin - for that is what we are -
How could you, in good conscience, freely mar
My reputation and your own good name:
Your own - and mine - since they are both the same!

Some distant relations you have in France,
Who receiving news of your gallant stance -
And too of the vile, murderous events
That cost you a brother and both parents -
Have hastened me to give service and aid:
And further your quest with a tempered blade."
"Your kind assistance, I shall not refuse;
But how, dear Cousin, did you hear the news?"
"Your worthy father had a faithful friend
Who has crossed to France for this very end.

A substantial force he intends to raise
And plans to set sail within thirty days.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

But my country has troubles of her own;
The land is rent by war, the people groan."
"I would fain hear the name of whom you speak.
If Ormond, he fares like the antique Greek
And overcomes grave trials and dangers
To garner help among far off strangers."
"Ormond was indeed the proud name he gave.
Hearing him discourse made my sword a slave

Of thy great cause and too bloody labor.
I cajoled from my father this favor,
So he with mixed pride and pain did agree
To my fronting the grave and stormy sea."
"Ormond alive and shortly on his way;
For greater bliss, I would not dare to pray."
The Maiden clapped her graceful hands with joy.
Then Annabelle spoke: looking shy and coy:
"Those large, brown eggs, kind sir, look freshly laid;
We'll give whatever you deem fair in trade."

Pierre briefly glanced her way and in a thrice,
Lost his heart for a seeming modest price.
Her dark eyes were pools of infinite space.
She had cherry lips in an oval face
With sleek, raven hair that composed a frame.
Her cheeks could put the fairest rose to shame.
"What kind trade dost thou offer?" Pierre stuttered.
"Oh dear: first love," Jonah softly muttered.
"A roast goose," she said. "With a crackling skin;
A rich, dark sauce to dip a biscuit in;

Mincemeat and apple pies; a tangy cheese;
A hearty wine you can drink to the lees;
And with those eggs, a frothy omelet
To finish a feast you'll not soon forget."

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

An innocent strand fell across one eye;
Her piercing glance was guileless - and yet sly.
Cheeks afire, bold Pierre mutely bowed his head
While the Maiden kindly spoke in his stead:
"My cousin's journey has indeed been long;
Let us show our welcome with food and song.

Tonight we have good reason to rejoice.
Great France will raise her formidable voice
And will give succor to our noble cause.
Soon enough will we pull John's vicious claws."
As usual, thought Flame, a bit naïve;
In France, I'm not so ready to believe.