

The Brave Maiden

A Verse Novel

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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.

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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.

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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

XV

Battle

The burning sun felt like hot coals that noon.
Egbert whistled an ancient, dirge-like tune.
Horses were saddled and arrows counted;
Armor was fastened as soldiers mounted.
Bowstrings were tightly drawn and lances decked
With fluttering pennons. Axes were checked;
And swords, the mighty instruments of Mars,
Sparkled like the myriad distant stars.
Annabelle gave orders in a flurry,
Urging knights to saddle up and hurry.

The fighters were ready and assembled.
The Brave Maiden, at their head, resembled
A fierce warrior queen of ancient lore,
Fully mantled with the dour tools of war.
This diverse army of plebeian cast,
Culled like the fishes of the foaming vast
And trained in a calling 'til then unknown
(To them), had, from a tiny seed, now grown
To a force that could confront misery
And change the course of woeful history.

She surveyed this army fresh and eager,
Sprung from roots so clearly rough and meager,
And felt, mixed with pride, a hesitation:
Could she lead this rapid catenation
Or would events spin out of her control
And leave her shorn of her immortal soul?
A soft breeze stirred the stifling, humid air
Lifting from her shoulders a heavy care.
She briefly caught sight of the smiling fox
While her fingers played with her auburn locks.

She lifted high her sword and fiercely cried:
"Forward, dear friends, for neither gold nor pride;
But to strike for justice a fervent blow.
We shall show mercy to the vanquished foe."
Lusty cheers resounded throughout the glen
Thrilling the hearts of brave women and men.
There is one, however, she sternly thought
Who will not survive our enraged onslaught.
Ormond now rode forward and raised his sword,
Requesting quiet from the cheering horde.

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"Most excellent fighters, noble and brave,"
He addressed them in a voice calm yet grave.
"We fight to bring peace to a troubled land
And see justice served with an even hand.
The light of your deeds will forever burn,
But some who go today will not return.
She who has led you to honor and fame
Has from policy withheld her proud name;
So before this bold journey doth begin,
Pray all bow to the Princess Gwendolyn,

Princess of the royal line and true heir
To haughty, unwed, barren John, whose fair
Sister was Mother to this brave princess.
The King has dark, grievous sins to confess.
So as further cause to our noble fight,
We boldly march to claim her distaff right
To succeed King John on proud England's throne.
John, for his vicious habits, must atone;
And while we hesitate in his demise,
He henceforth will rule justly – or he dies.

To that end, a wise charter has been writ
That binds him to rule - not as he sees fit -
But only with the estates' due consent.
It is a bold and wondrous document."
Ormond's speech sparked an uproarious din
With wild cries of "Gwendolyn! Gwendolyn!"
William's shock could not be considered mild;
The Princess nodded graciously and smiled.
"Milady ... Your Highness ... my impudence ..."
"Twas nothing, dear friend, but sound evidence

Of your prodigious love and high esteem
For me. May I prove worthy of your dream.
The pledge I made thee I shall not forget.
Now see that your sturdy archers are set
To march, for hard traveling lies ahead;
And we sup on naught but hard cheese and bread.
By day and night shall we swiftly travel
To catch the King and his plot unravel.
Like a sly cat, we rest in fleeting naps,
With a shrewd eye open for fiendish traps.

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I hear John's dreaded minions are afoot.
To crush their power, we must firmly put
Every muscle and sinew to the wheel.
The danger we face, I cannot conceal.
But as brothers and sisters, we stand fast.
Now spur our horses, for the die is cast."
The Princess raised her mighty sword once more.
Her warriors responded with a roar;
And as the ear-splitting cheer reached the sky,
The army surged forward, weapons held high.

They rode through the forest for two full days
With spirits high and singing roundelays.
Annabelle and Pierre traveled together;
They wore in their caps a sprig of heather.
The twins, as always, argued merrily,
Stabbing the air with shouts of "verily".
William preceded his corps of marksmen,
Their ranks swelled with hardy men and women
Who could hit mid-flight a flying squirrel
Or cut from a necklace a gleaming pearl.

They emerged from the dark, purple shadows
To blink in the glare of sun-drenched meadows.
They trotted east along a narrow road
Seeing neither village nor thatched abode.
But soon, a galloping band of twenty
Men, raising dust and with arms aplenty,
Rode over a low crest and into sight.
They were led by a dashing, tousled knight.
"My beautiful warrior," he exclaimed.
"Your audacious spirit has not been tamed,

But this time you've brought an imposing force.
Might you care for another twenty horse?"
"I thought you had but a private motive
And that it would take more than a votive
Candle for you to fight out of season.
Our war, but for justice, has no reason."
"Milady, I have sought thee high and low
And raised a valiant troop in hopes to show
The deeper side of a complex nature.
Let your heart be judge and legislature,

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And I will ask no more distinguished prize
Than a welcome look from thy flashing eyes."
"Welcome, then to our beneficent cause;
We can now, however, no longer pause.
Ormond, prithee assign these men a place
Along our line." "With great pleasure, Your Grace."
The knight recoiled in disbelief and shock:
"Is this some wayward jest or sullen mock?"
"Mais non," said Ormond in a courtly tone.
"The Princess Gwendolyn, heir to the throne."

The tousled knight bowed feeling much chagrined.
Gwendolyn looked stern but inwardly grinned.
A knight, she thought, with a fair countenance;
That leads not to the way of abstinence.
In short, I fear I may lose my poor heart;
But prithee place the horse before the cart.
We have hard riding and a war to win
Else there be scant hope of Queen Gwendolyn.
I am in truth quite pleased to see him here.
The heavy odds we face are most severe,

And he can fight like a tiger uncaged -
Or a proud woman whom life hath enraged.
Yet his ways are not lacking in humor -
Nor subtle charm. But court we not rumor.
Let us bank the fires of nascent feelings
And show ourselves wary in our dealings
Until we shall better test his mettle.
Does a fight alone show his fine fettle?
"Come, eager knight, let us be on our way;
I bid thee ride with Ormond this fine day."

The following day about mid-morning,
Trumpets blared; and with no hint of warning,
Over a low hill thundered King John's knights,
Scattering small birds into screeching flights.
The air trembled with a deafening roar
As churning, pounding hooves towards them bore
A gut-wrenching charge with lances leveled.
Gwendolyn's troops stood as if bedeviled
Until the tousled knight was heard to shout,
"Charge smartly, comrades, or we face a rout!"

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He and Princess Gwendolyn took the lead,
Followed by Pierre on his hot-blooded steed.
Her soldiers then let loose a rousing cry:
"For Princess Gwendolyn: conquer or die!"
But John's fast-charging forces reached them first;
And Ormond, wielding his sword, feared the worst.
The battle raged amidst shrill cries of pain;
Three youthful French knights were already slain.
Pierre was struck, and blood seeped from his shoulder;
He looked haggard and many years older.

Gwendolyn thrust her sword and pierced a throat;
Her dying foe shrieked like a slaughtered shoat.
She saw the tousled knight swing a huge mace,
Then turn round to her with an impish face:
"Most honored Princess, this be dreary work
And better left to the blood thirsty Turk
Who separates with delight heads from necks,
Caring little if they be French or Czechs."
Confusion and disorder everywhere;
Groans and bellowed oaths in the dusty air;

Swords and battle-axes stained black with blood;
Exhausted faces marked with sweat and crud;
The grappling armies wildly writhed and churned
Like a speared monster to the deep returned.
Her troops fought valiantly to no avail;
Bit by bit, John's knights began to prevail.
They pushed the Princess towards a swift stream.
Flashing in the sun were silvery bream.
The racing waters would block a retreat;
And all would now end in bloody defeat.

Just as a crushing rout and chaos loomed,
A horn sounded; and Jonah's deep voice boomed:
"Attack! Attack! No weak-kneed mercy show!"
Jonah's troops dealt the King a stinging blow,
Attacking unseen from around the hill
And depriving John of his gory kill.
The heartless battle slowed its torrid pace.
John's weary knights showed not the slightest trace
Of eagerness the Princess to pursue
As she rallied her forces and withdrew.

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The two armies camped at no great distance;
The morrow would bring a further instance
Of intense fighting and mortal struggle.
The Princess had no spare troops to juggle.
Her camp grew still as black night descended;
Sparks from the fires to Heaven ascended.
The jolly, fighting surgeon's task was grim
As he staunched wounds by the flickering, dim
Light of resin torches. Wild, piercing screams
Rent the night and would, like ghosts, haunt their dreams.

The worn Princess spoke in a somber voice
And asked her close friends what, if any, choice
They had but to fight on as best they could.
Their chances, she averred, were hardly good.
"But first: Annabelle, how goes our bold Pierre?"
"Pretty fair, Your Grace, he does passing fair
And ready to fight at the break of dawn
Unless the King's men are long up and gone."
"Ah, French wit. Your instincts, Ormond, were sound;
To Sarafina, we'll one day get round."

"And Your Grace drew the correct conclusion.
Jonah's charge was an inspired intrusion
Without which we would surely not be here,
Debating the next step in your career."
Gwendolyn looked from one to the other:
"Long have we lived and labored together.
Our mutual respect is built on trust;
To deceive is something we never must
Do. Outnumbered by at least two to one,
Tomorrow's battle will hardly be fun.

For myself, I have a pledge to fulfill.
Any man – or woman – for whom the chill
Breath of black, hovering Death draws too nigh
Should leave with no tear or remorseful sigh."
Her bleak words cast on them a heavy pall;
Annabelle shivered beneath her wool shawl.
William was the first to break the silence;
His words were soft but tinged with violence.
"First among us to hear Your Grace's creed,
I taught you the bow; you taught me to read.

A wandering scoundrel, you gave me hope;
I might, otherwise, have swung from a rope."
The arguing twins were the next to speak,
But with just one voice - neither brash nor meek:
"You found us shameful boys and made us men.
And though your thoughts are oft beyond our ken,
You offer plain justice to all alike.
For the Brave Maiden, we face lance or pike."

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Annabelle spoke in a voice strong and clear:
"I have always held portrait painting dear,
But art is just so much useless rubbish
Where freedom and justice do not flourish.
I now have learned to fight as well as paint;
My resolve is sure and in no ways faint."
Bearded Jonah rose up to his full height
And exclaimed with the God of Jacob's might:
"My Princess, you welcomed an errant Jew
And refused to hate as so many do.

You need no statement of my loyalty,
Which is yours as plain maid or royalty.
Besides what this finker loves most of all
Is a hearty fight and a rousing brawl."
"As much," laughed the Princess, "As poaching roe?"
Jonah nodded and watched the fire's hot glow.
"I am the last here to join this crusade,
But Your Grace one time hurried to my aid –
Not to forget your snarling, wolfish friend
Who saved us from a cruel, fiendish end.

Running has never been much to my taste;
And besides, this field is too good to waste.
They must charge us at a downwards angle.
Aiming from below will cause a tangle.
When that occurs, we will with swords wade in,"
Finished the tousled knight with a wide grin.
"We shall also place archers in yon copse
To attack their flanks and destroy their hopes,"
Added the Princess in a quiet way.
Ormond had something he wanted to say:

"Your officers are all of the same mind;
The troops, as well, I am sure you will find.
John's knights are trained in all facets of war,
But your fighters are trained – and one thing more:
They have a sacred cause for which they fight;
And of this factor, one should not make light.
I think it past time we all went to bed.
Enough is known, and enough has been said."
"Thank you, noble Ormond, and all the rest.
Tomorrow God metes out a fearsome test.

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Our intention is not to harm the King,
But above all he must see this one thing:
A king rules always for the common weal
And thus must neither tyrannize nor steal.
Victorious, we impose the charter;
Beaten, our lives are not worth a garter.
Go ye now; rest in whatsoever style
Ye may. Pray let me walk alone awhile."
The Princess moved about in plain attire
And left encouragement at every fire.

A young peasant woman newly arrived
Asked all too earnestly wherefore they strived.
"We fight for justice, peace and rights for all -
No matter whether they be great or small.
This looming battle sets for us a course
That to lose will bring ages of remorse."
Her words caused sighs and murmurs of assent.
She kept on under God's broad firmament
And sat on a hardwood stump deep in thought.
Sarah lay beside the fresh stump and caught

Her mood. Gwendolyn recalled as a child
The first time her knightly father beguiled
Her with a little, wooden sword. She held
It fast in her fist and years later felled
In a tourneys, a seasoned knight - first of
Many. She gazed at sparkling stars above
And thought of stories a magician told
Of myriad creatures from planets cold
As ice and boiling hot - all far removed
>From earth and on mankind greatly improved.

Strange, but any stranger than here below?
At which point, the black night began to glow.
I wonder, she thought, if tomorrow eve;
I'll see these bright stars and so calmly breathe.
The elfin Queen and King now hovered near;
Sarah roughly growled and pricked up an ear.
The diaphanous Queen waved her slim wand
Over Sarah's head like a swaying frond.
The gray wolf lay her head between her paws
As sleep closed her eyes and slackened her jaws.

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Father, Mother, I badly need your help;
I am little more than a wet-eared whelp.
Many on each side will tomorrow fall
Because I dared raise a clarion call.
By what fool's arrogant, out-jointed pride
Did I think to divert the rushing tide
Of men's affairs to a different course?
Arrayed against us is a mighty force,
The terrible power and panoply
Of high England. Do we stand fast or flee?

This heavy choice cannot be called a choice.
My counselors have spoken with one voice.
We have thus far made such noble progress
As would bid us advance and not regress.
Though I am proper heir and royal niece,
Dare I seek to capture the Golden Fleece?
Tomorrow I may stand next to the throne,
But tonight I feel frightened and alone.
The elfin Queen then stretched out a finger,
Touched Gwendolyn's cheek but did not linger.

Yet I see before me only one road;
I am no timid sheep that needs a goad.
In such a worthy cause, how can we fail?
It will be John's wicked knights who turn tail.
She scratched the dozing wolf between the ears;
Tomorrow would come without doubts or tears.
As she walked back to camp, her mind at ease;
She noticed a strangely familiar breeze.
"Thank you, Father, the road ahead is straight.
Count Gerard, come meet, God willing, thy fate."

As dawn brushed the sky with pale, rosy streaks;
Both camps stirred; and as the warrior Greeks
Studied entrails for signs of yea or nay,
Clusters of anxious fighters knelt to pray.
Every soldier to the same God appealed
With a cross here and there upon a shield.
As their own God, each army laid a claim
And sought victory in his righteous name.
As Gwendolyn prayed, a thundering sound
Brought her troops to their feet and shook the ground.

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Five score riders approached - weapons at rest.
They rode towards camp from the still dark west -
Five score knights led by a tall, craggy earl.
Many wore round their necks a handsome pearl.
Ormond's face broke into a wide-lipped smile:
"Owen of Harlech, you're always in style.
Your Grace, may I present our Welch allies.
When Owen promises, he never lies."
"All the border knights are welcome indeed;
The Welch have long suffered from King John's greed."

Owen replied: "I take your cause as mine;
Now may Heaven our destinies entwine."
>From across the meadow, trumpets rang out.
All mounted fast and heard Gwendolyn shout:
"The moment of our great trial has come.
Let each one here add to the total sum
Of all our hopes and high expectancies.
Adamantine fate flings us on the seas
Of bloody combat. That, we must endure;
But take comfort, for victory is sure

If each man and woman play well their part.
Evil shall not conquer a valiant heart.
We have a noble cause for which we stand
And which we shall trumpet throughout the land.
Archers, hie to your protected places;
Victory will soon light up your faces.
Mounted troops, form your battle lines to charge.
We advance to a destiny writ large."
And now the din of pounding hooves was heard.
Time, for an instant, stopped; and no one stirred.

Pennons flapping, horses at a dead run,
Their armor glinting in the morning sun,
The sight of the King's charge curdled the blood
As the meadow was trampled in a flood
Of foam-bedecked chargers and visored knights.
In the bright sky circled two keen-eyed kites -
Silent witnesses to the scene below
Where Death sharpened his scythe, and blood would flow.
John's galloping knights leveled sharp lances;
Gwendolyn and Ormond exchanged glances.

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The King's army numbered five hundred strong.
"Charge!" cried the Princess as she spurred headlong
Into the path of the onrushing tide,
Greeting her fate like a dewy-eyed bride.
Owen and Ormond spurred forward as well.
In a flash was broken the fearful spell,
And her emboldened troops surged to the fore
As shouts of "Gwendolyn" rose in a roar.
A cloud of arrows whistled overhead
To claim the first of this day's many dead.

Will's archers again stretched their supple bows
And shot from the copse and behind hedgerows.
Wounded coursers screamed in pain and tumbled
While their fallen riders tripped and stumbled,
Gyved in their heavy, clanking suits of mail.
Death-dealing arrows fell like sheets of hail.
Up and down the meadow, the armies clashed.
Sparks flew from whetted swords, and maces crashed
Against bobbing helmets and plates of steel.
A callow knight began to slowly kneel

In the clutches of Death's unyielding grip,
Pierced through the stomach by a lance's tip.
His cold hands gripped the lance; his jaw was set
In a frieze of pain one would not forget.
All through the hot morning, the battle raged
As if two rival beasts had been uncaged.
Of defeat, all foresaw the consequence
And plied their grisly task with a vengeance.
A gust of wind disturbed the leaden air
And swirled blood-flecked, choking dust everywhere.

Annabelle found it difficult to breathe
As she thrust and parried without reprieve.
Two hardened knights had she already killed.
Blood-stained her armor, her dry mouth was filled
With the sour taste of grime and ashen dust.
Her youthful eyes gleamed with the killing lust,
Which intemperate battle so enflames
That commonplace life seems but children's games
When justly weighed against the frenzied state
Of killing foes for whom Death will not wait.

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Her quivering arms felt consumed with fire;
Her worn sword she could barely lift higher
Than her waist. Leaning against an oak tree,
Cruel Philip's attack she did not see.
Raising his sword to strike a blow most foul,
Philip just then heard a deep-throated growl
And turned in time to see a springing blur.
His last sensation was of fangs and fur
As Sarah neatly ripped his throat in two
And left his torn windpipe dangling askew.

"Sarah, that bit gave me a nasty fright,"
Patting the wolf as she rejoined the fight.
Unhorsed, the dogged twins fought back to back,
Each in turn with a mocking joke to crack.
"Lay on, ye simpering aristocrats;
We've brought steel enough for a dozen rats,"
Egbert laughed as he parried a quick thrust
By bluff Sir Roger who shouted and cussed:
"You bigmouthed peasant scum, I'll split your head
And make you wish you had stayed home abed."

So saying, a vicious riposte struck home;
Egbert sighed and sputtered thick blood and foam,
Collapsing wordless at his brother's feet.
His twin turned pale as a white linen sheet.
Howling like a vengeful Fury, Selwyn
Straddled the body of his fallen twin
And a studded mace so mightily swung
That he cracked Roger's ribs and pierced a lung.
The knight fell dying on top of Egbert;
The two bodies quivered, then lay inert.

Jonah ranged over the meadow at will,
Unhorsing knights with his brawn and great skill.
Stephen of Kent faced him in a duel
And met the fate of Philip the Cruel,
But not before his slashing sword cut deep.
Dark blood the ragged wound began to seep,
But brave Jonah fought on despite the cut
Until he fell off by a crofter's hut.
Riding near, the tousled knight saw him fall
And defended him against one and all.

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Gwendolyn saw this by fortunate chance
And ordered two men, each armed with a lance,
To stand guard while his torn shoulder was bound.
Gallant Jonah staggered up from the ground
And unwisely sought to remount his steed,
But the deep wound began once more to bleed.
"Rest easy, valiant friend," cried Gwendolyn.
"This battle we will in short order win.
I feel God telling me the tide has turned;
The moment will soon come for which I've yearned."

Indeed, the King's forces were falling back
Under the pressure of her grim attack.
The foul Duke of Essex was seen to flee.
The High Constable strove desperately
To halt the collapse - but of little use.
First fear, then stark panic, was on the loose.
As the King's men began a headlong run,
Gwendolyn searched for that envenomed one
With whom she had yet to settle a score.
Suddenly, she heard a sneering voice: "Whore!"

And turned quickly to face Gerard's contempt
As he bore down in a craven attempt
To dispatch the Princess while unprepared.
For truth or a fair fight, he little cared.
She lifted her shield in the nick of time,
But the blow knocked her in the dust and grime.
She struggled to her feet, her leg in pain,
And barely caught hold of a hanging rein
As Gerard spurred his horse and galloped past.
Jerking the loose rein tight and holding fast,

She spun the horse around and spilled Gerard,
Who crashed to the blood-soaked ground swearing hard.
She waited patiently for him to rise,
Then lifted her bright sword up towards the skies
And brought it down in a broad, sweeping arc
That Gerard parried just shy of its mark.
He swung his sword in turn and struck her arm;
She cried out in pain which sparked great alarm
In the tousled knight who stepped to the fray.
Ormond touched his arm and commanded: "Nay!"

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"This is a fight she must win on her own.
There are some paths in life we tread alone."
Gerard then delivered a vicious thrust
That sent the Princess reeling in the dust.
He towered above her with sword raised high
And laughing, said "Wench, get ready to die."
As a mournful cry rose from stricken hearts,
She kicked him smartly in the nether parts
And rising, fiercely drove her sword beneath
His breastplate. He fell dying to the heath,

Her blade driven up from stomach to chest.
The quivering hilt came slowly to rest.
A trickle of dark blood flowed down his chin.
Gerard's final sight was of Gwendolyn
Standing triumphant with tears in her eyes
As she spoke familiar names to the skies.
Beside his dead body, she quickly knelt
And drew a crested dagger from his belt.

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Epilogue

(Three Days Later)

King John dispatched under a flag of truce
A high baron who offered no excuse
For the King's corrupt rule and England's state,
But promised instead to negotiate.
In a field by a meandering brook,
Princess and uncle oaths of friendship took,
Then sat to talk at a rough-hewn table.
The King's barons wore cloaks fringed with sable.
The Princess appeared in humble raiment
But made her claim with a forceful statement.

"England is reeling from adversity.
She needs good laws, peace and prosperity:
A king who rules with impartial justice
And will banish every evil practice."
The charter she described in some detail.
As its meaning sunk in, the King turned pale.
She ended her speech with a quiet threat
That John should do nothing he might regret.
Gwendolyn allowed him some minor points,
Then rapped the table with her finger joints.

"If His Highness would be so good to sign,
We shall then repair to my camp to dine."
The High Constable watched with intense care
The Charter signed and Gwendolyn named heir.
All his elaborate schemes now vanished,
His high-flying aspirations banished:
But only, he thought, for the here and now
As his sullen mouth formed a silent vow
That he would in good time ascend the throne.
This thought he buried like a dog a bone.

As the Princess walked back towards her tent,
Two archers approached her with shoulders bent
Under the weight of a body they bore.
William, lying for three days at death's door,
Had just now relinquished his earthly shell
To answer the call of a distant bell.
With a seeping wound like a shallow pit,
Neither God nor the surgeon could seal it.
Day and night she had sought to comfort him,
Her eyes filling with tears up to the brim.

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"Milady, pray you do not weep for me,
But send this body to my family.
Tell them I served God and a Princess well
And in raging battle was how I fell.
Tell them also how I had learned to read;
How from shameful ignorance was I freed."
She promised all of that and more besides;
Poverty no longer would tan their hides.
"By my royal and invested power,
I now dub thee knight, my faithful archer.

As Sir William shall thou henceforth be known."
At these words, his shuttering eyes had flown
Open. In truth, each word now cost him dear:
"Thus honored, death I shall no longer fear."
She left his side only to meet the King
So was not there to hear his angels sing.
They shouldered him amidst silent weeping.
Peaceful, he appeared to her: just sleeping.
She softly bade them lay the body down
And garb it gently in a silken gown.

She requested Jonah to say a prayer
To entrust William to God's loving care.
For Egbert, Selwyn spoke in quiet tones,
Giving to the deep earth his flesh and bones.
He bade his spirit like a falcon soar
To watch over the Princess evermore.
All the dead were with solemn grace interred
While funeral masses and prayers were heard.
This doleful work, Thomas and John's priest shared;
No two less likely priests were ever paired.

Music that night through the camp resounded.
The fighters danced and in great leaps bounded
O'er flames. They sang in hearty unison
Without surcease until the morning sun
Brought healing sleep to aching bones and limbs.
Joined in merriment, hopeful peace begins
As the vanquished with victor celebrate;
And many encounter a worthy mate.
These proceedings, Flame looked at with dismay.
Will they so simply turn night into day?

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She thought with a horse's cynical sense.
"For this peace to last, I'd not give tuppence!"
Gwendolyn and John watched with royal grace.
Ormond and Jonah had each a high place,
Soon to be knighted by a future Queen.
Jonah's appetite was never more keen.
Painter again and Royal Treasurer,
Annabelle barely created a stir
By stating that she and Pierre planned to wed.
The Princess winked at her and dipped her head,

Asking the tousled knight with a shy grin:
"And who will wed poor Princess Gwendolyn?"
"Surely there be those with fortune and fame
Preceding a rude knight without a name."
"In this fabled land, I might garner both;
Yet to thee would I rather pledge my troth."
"And to thee do I freely give my love,
Sworn now before God and the stars above."
His words were greeted with a rousing cheer
As the Princess spoke softly in his ear,

"To whose name shall I murmur endearments
And swear my faith in holy sacraments?"
"Sir Hugh of Weatherford, my Brave Maiden,
Who shall be your husband and safe haven
Wherein ye shelter from the rude turmoil
That marks an honest monarch's ceaseless toil.
We shall have love, honor and progeny
To flatter thy wisdom upon thy knee."
"Never to me was such sweet love vouchsafed,
Nor my lonely heart so ardently chafed.

And thus my love to you I warmly give;
As man and wife, we shall forever live."
The elfin Queen now spread her gauzy wings
And hovered o'er head as a soft chime rings.
Elves and sprites in the spectral firelight danced;
Floating choirs sang, and mythic horses pranced.
Sarah calmly lifted her head to growl
As she heard in the woods a mournful howl.
Gazing raptly at a carpet of stars,
Gwendolyn's eye caught the red planet Mars.

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Her thoughts now revolved around love and war;
To preserve the peace was a course she swore.
She thought of dear friends and family lost;
The cause was won but at a heavy cost.
She had traveled by a road long and hard
And not for a moment been off her guard.
She thought back to the very beginning.
In her ears, her Father's words were ringing:
"Honor and justice make a worthy cause;
Peace and prosperity need careful laws."

The journey begun as the merest child,
A Queen, from the cocoon, emerged and smiled.
"My Father would I lief see once again
To tell I have made my way among men –
And women." She felt then a gentle breeze
Touch her cheek and disappear in the trees.
As she gazed engrossed at the blazing fire,
She felt her spirits grow ever higher.

The End