

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 a quarter 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



XI

The Raid

The camp was in a furious bustle
Preparing for a vigorous tussle.
A scared serf had arrived in camp at dusk;
He spoke coarsely, and his manner was brusque.
His long hair was matted, his clothing dank;
And he told a tale that of evil stank.
His village lay within Philip's domain,
Who imposed a harsh rule with might and main.
His sobriquet he earned with room to spare;
There was no cruelty he did not dare.

In the village lived a happy couple.
A dark beauty, she was slim and supple.
They spent their days growing barley and rye.
Philip saw her one day while riding by.
Her beauty struck a hot spark of desire.
That same day his fat reeve came to require
The maid's presence at the castle forthwith.
What next occurred has the air of a myth.
The faithful beauty refused to comply.
Her stout husband gave the reeve a black eye,

Who ran for his horse wailing and cursing.
His bloody nose would likewise need nursing.
Hearing the news, Philip was mortified;
His sharp lust, with rage, was now fortified.
Next morning, in the rain, to their hovel,
Philip sent four knights to make them grovel.
The couple stood tall refusing to bend.
Threatened by the knights with a gruesome end,
They were flailed with swords and dragged through the mud.
Their faces torn and encrusted with crud;

They were thrown in a cart and hauled to jail,
Leaving three young children to weep and wail.
They lay on the floor of an unlit cell.
"Tomorrow I shall send them both to Hell,"
Laughed Philip gaily as he slapped his knee.
"Beheading is such a fine sight to see.
A good lesson to teach this scum their place,
Mercy will have no cause to show her face."
Heralds rode forth the event to proclaim;
Philip felt not an iota of shame.

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The serf finished his strange tale of sorrow:
"But for you, my sister dies tomorrow."
The Maiden felt uncontrolled anger surge.
Such vile deeds were what she had vowed to purge;
And though she did not know exactly how,
She would find the means that would not allow
The barons and their ilk to run amok.
Right now, daring was needed - and some luck.
She called a war council into session;
They voted to halt this foul oppression.

In minutes, the council had made fair plans
To rescue the doomed pair from Philip's hands.
Their bold plan involved a double attack.
They also aimed Philip's strong room to sack:
To relieve the earl of his gold and coin.
"Relieve," joked the Maiden, "But not purloin;
For Philip did not his riches attain
Except through theft and inflicting great pain.
Two groups would separately make their way
Disguised as peasants come for market day.

The Maiden thrilled to dress like a rank hag;
On her head, she wore an old, filthy rag,
Which stank and hid from sight her shining hair.
While the rescue team was under her care,
Jonah was charged with the audacious raid
To liberate the gold. He shortly bade
His dear friends adieu; and in merchant's guise,
Left on his own for town to best apprise
Himself of the hated earl's resources.
The rest came next day on panting horses.

Jonah slowly explored the town's by-ways,
Looking like he'd ridden dusty highways.
In an alley, he found a grim tavern;
Its dark bar felt like a dripping cavern.
A curt, one-eyed wench sold beer and cider.
No one heeded this tall, burly rider
Who fed his horse in the tavern stable
And sat down at a worn, pock-marked table
Near a mute, cowled monk who simply nodded
And spoke up only when gently prodded:

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"Brother, what dishes here are fit to eat?
I crave venison or some boiled pig's feet.
Art thou partial to roast mutton or fowl?
Is that a smile lurking behind your scowl?
Wouldst thou partake of a small, steaming cup?"
The gloomy monk visibly brightened up.
This good cleric took many more than one
And cost a goodly sum ere he was done.
His frozen tongue warmed by cider and ale,
He recounted for Jonah a strange tale.

His father was for years a castle smith;
Of ten close-spaced children, he was the fifth.
His mother he lost when he was quite young.
His stepmother a shrew with biting tongue,
Who swore at his father all too roundly
And with a broom, beat the children soundly.
She was a widow with three howling brats,
Always bothering him like buzzing gnats.
She gave her precious own the choicest food
And lambasted poor Tom if he were rude.

Of some grievous sin, he was once accused
While his father, looking chagrined, excused
Himself and without a fuss, disappeared.
Towards nightfall - dead drunk - he reappeared
And, muttering nonsense, fell sound asleep.
>From this, no fruitful harvest can one reap.
Tom's comrades now came from the meaner sort
Who kept barely free of the hundreds court.
They stole ripe apples from a blind man's stall
And, from a tree, hung a funeral pall.

Rubbing a plump sow with grease and rank grass,
They set her loose during mid-morning mass
But did not stay to watch the cursing priest,
With cassock flapping, chase the squealing beast.
The bailiff spoke wisely to Tom's father
Who cuffed the glum boy but did not bother
To put down his tankard of foaming beer
While his lips curled in a simpering leer.
The lad continued his droll pranks apace;
With doom, he was running a losing race.

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The sheriff gave him a final warning;
Tom fled from home the very next morning.
For three months, he wandered the county roads,
Begging, stealing or carting heavy loads.
He fell in one day with a band of thieves
Who poached under the noses of dull reeves
Until one day red-handed they were caught
And before an enraged seignior were brought.
He proclaimed that at dawn, they would be hung;
And into one large grave, their corpses flung.

A kind friar prevented Tom's demise:
"Hanging youngsters is a sin in God's eyes."
The good friar took Tom under his wing
And taught him to say daily prayers and sing
To the greater glory of God on high.
Tom finished his story with a deep sigh:
"I owe my soul to that godly friar
Who rescued me from Hell's eternal fire."
They talked until they heard the midnight bell.
It seemed that the monk knew the castle well;

For to Philip's minions, he often preached,
Hoping that in some way, their souls he reached.
"As a past sinner, who am I to judge?
Their hope for redemption should I begrudge?
I know Philip to be unsavory;
He will one day walk his own Calvary."
"Shall we now," asked Jonah. "Talk man to man?"
He described in detail his cunning plan
To raid the strong room at the very hour
When the couple is led from the tower

For their beheading in the market square.
"Philip's men in armor will all be there
Leaving only a meager castle guard.
This coup will be fit subject for a bard.
My soldiers will arrive in town at dawn,"
He said, fighting vainly the urge to yawn.
The monk smiled and agreed to serve as guide;
He was the sort in whom you could confide.
"But what of the unhappy couple's fate?
Can aught be done afore it is too late?"

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"We must in mighty Jehovah believe.
Their agony, I hope, He will relieve."
Tom regarded Jonah slightly askance:
"Art thou keeping some deep secret, perchance?
No matter, 'tis time for a few hours' rest.
Tomorrow, we may find ourselves hard-pressed.
I see you are not of the Christian church;
But all are one in the arduous search
For love, salvation and omniscient God -
Until we lie beneath a grassy sod."

So saying, the monk lay down on a bench.
Jonah softly approached the one-eyed wench.
"Annabelle has spoken kindly of you.
Do you think you could get a message through?"



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The Maiden's soldiers filtered into town
And divided into groups up and down
The square. Blending in with the market crowd,
They inspected trinkets and laughed out loud.
Their horses were held in a nearby wood
Where William and a score of archers stood.
Jonah's troops loaded a cart with gammon,
Ready for the watchmen to examine.
Tom and Jonah met them near the south gate
Which swung open just as the bell struck eight.

Philip and two score knights in measured ranks
Ushered forth as a balding priest gave thanks
For the blessings of Philip's gentle rule.
This venal hireling was no simple fool
But had a handsome share of Philip's loot.
The bystanders meanwhile stood wisely mute
As the lovers, hands bound behind their backs,
Strode to meet the executioner's axe.
With dignity they walked, their heads held high;
There were few that morning whose eyes were dry.

Jonah led his party past a gantry
And left the hams at the kitchen pantry.
Some old walls were being renovated.
Their presence was not investigated.
Tom led them through high-ceilinged, drafty halls
With tapestries adorning clammy walls.
Scenes of dying men and broken lances
Amidst rolling hills and quiet manses
Looked down on Jonah's troops as if to ask:
"For what purpose do you pursue this task?"

The monk led them down a dank corridor,
Which reached, at the north end, the strong room door.
Two guards, in the throes of sleep, were dispatched
To a fate with which they were rightly matched.
Neither guard had carried a strong room key.
"Hell's fire," said Tom. "This I did not foresee."
"Pray let me present a tinker's jewels,"
Chuckled Jonah showing a bag of tools.
The strong room was opened quick as a wink -
Before the incredulous monk could blink.

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They entered the dim room in silent awe,
Gaping in disbelief at what they saw.
Bulging sacks of coins were arranged in rows
Like well-copied lines of elegant prose.
Tables were laden with jeweled caskets;
Strings of creamy pearls spilled from straw baskets.
There were boxes enough with precious stones
To repay the King's intemperate loans
That he spent on splendiferous tourneys,
Epicurean feasts and court journeys.

"This," said Jonah. "Explains our misery.
When seeing this, what crime is usury?"
The raiders carried a load down the stairs,
Then hurried back for additional wares.
Tom volunteered to guard the creaking cart;
He was a good monk of generous heart.
The second load did not take them as long;
But when they reached the yard, the cart was gone.
"Oh ye villainous monk and callous thief,"
Cursed Alice. "See how we are come to grief!"

Jonah spoke with no apparent concern:
"The scoundrel has done us no wicked turn.
Three of ours await him at the portal;
I trust in God but nary a mortal."
Laughed Jonah as he heaved a weighty bag:
"Let us join that counterfeit, ill-dressed hag
Who is on the verge of striking her blow.
Finish loading the cart and let it go.
The devious monk will feel much oppressed
When, his treacherous folly, soon confessed,

We'll deal with kindly and so instruct him
How, in wiser fashion, his sails to trim.
My, how I do love a pithy proverb;
Nor have I yet learned my wry tongue to curb."
At that moment, arose a shrill clamor
Of shouts and screams, of sword striking hammer.
Jonah's band broke into a headlong run,
Fearing to miss the fray - and all the fun.



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The procession soon reached the crowded square.
The Maiden had placed her soldiers with care.
Philip's men-at-arms had marched down mute streets,
With the only sound - ominous drumbeats.
A mourning crowd waited to let them pass;
Philip's priest intoned a funeral mass.
The doomed couple was calm and dignified;
With deep love, their resolve was fortified.
A platform waited with pennants flying:
A stark thing sporting grim tools for dying.

On the platform rested a blood-stained block;
Seeing it gave the couple a nasty shock.
His face hidden behind an opaque mask,
The ax man awaited his gruesome task.
His dark eyes were calm and unrevealing.
To Philip, there was no use appealing
So they mounted the few steps side by side.
Their hands entwined, they neither spoke nor cried,
But stood in steadfast peace, heads bowed in prayer
Until they took a last, deep gulp of air.

The executioner raised high his axe
But then stopped quite suddenly in his tracks
And let go the deadly axe with a start
As a sharp arrow pierced him through the heart.
His unrevealing eyes went cold and dead;
He would never cut off another head.
Then chaos in the tense square exploded
As the Maiden and her troops unloaded
Their righteous fury on Philip's minions.
Swords were drawn from ragged smocks and aprons.

The knights reacted with unfeigned surprise
To be struck by troops in plebeian guise.
One knight shouted: "God's blood, is this joke?
To face swords in the hands of common folk."
Short-lived, sad to say, was his noxious jibe;
His windpipe was slashed by a former scribe.
The Maiden swung her bloodied sword about
While prodding her troops with a piercing shout:
"In the name of divine justice, attack:
Showing no quarter nor giving them slack!"

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Sword and ax clashed one upon the other
As the crowd, in terror, ran for shelter.
The Maiden brandished her death-dealing sword;
Blood, from a badly wounded arm, then poured.
The air was shrill with grunts and awful groans,
The sounds of heaving lungs and cracking bones.
Back and forth, the fierce battle raged and churned;
Many were the market stalls overturned.
Strong hands meanwhile lifted the couple down
And spirited them quickly out of town.

The Maiden's forces over time gained sway,
Helped as Jonah's band rushed into the fray.
Hurling curses, Philip beat a retreat
And regrouped his knights in a narrow street.
In outraged tones, Philip harangued his men,
Commanding the cowards to charge again.
As his sharp tongue grew increasingly hot,
The contents of a brimming chamber pot
Were scornfully flung from a high dormer
To cleanse once strutting knights of their former

Vainglory. "Piss on ye," cried an old toad.
"Ye deserve prodding with a cattle goad
And dunking in the nearest foul sewer
To stink then of more than your own manure.
Brave enough at harassing poor widows,
Look how ye squiggle like frightened minnows
When faced with soldiers by God's justice armed.
Be sure that you leave this old head unharmed.
Come up here now and kiss my wrinkled ass -
And step aside to let brave women pass."

Thus the harridan cackled insanely
Through rotted teeth as the wet knights vainly
Swore, and cruel Philip was heard to roar:
"We'll return soon for you, you barren whore;
But for now, I have bigger fish to fry.
I want that proud Maiden hung out to dry."
Philip's men, insulted in their honor,
Charged forward for victory to garner.
The Maiden meanwhile pulled back her forces
And went to retrieve the waiting horses.

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The old harridan thought it best to flee
And seek other lodgings and sights to see.
Her spiteful tongue had worked enough today;
She would need all her luck to get away.
As she stepped outside, she met a barmaid
With one eye and a scar that would not fade.
The barmaid whispered into Jenny's ear
Wise words the old lady was glad to hear.
The beautiful maid winked her one good eye,
Like a smiling fox and perhaps as sly.

Philip's howling knights pursued the Maiden
To face the arrows of William's bowmen.
The dense hale of arrows flew straight and fast;
Philip's harsh tyranny will soon be past.
Many of his knights lay dead on the field.
Philip fled, but his fate would now be sealed.
The remnants of his tired force staggered back,
Too disheartened for a renewed attack.
>From the copse, the Maiden watched them depart,
Then knelt down to thank God with all her heart

For a victory at such modest cost:
Three fighters with light wounds but no one lost.
A learned doctor had joined her staff,
A rotund fellow with a hearty laugh.
Always ready with a wry witticism,
Of his healing, he brooked no criticism.
His trade was learned at university -
His art from knowledge of adversity.
And skill, from both, he could always summon.
He treated the sick, noble or common.

He had the darting eyes of an urchin;
His hands were calm as befits a surgeon.
Added to medical ability,
He could use a sword with facility.
He bound each wound with a clean linen wrap,
Turning to the Maiden to doff his cap.
She responded with a heart-warming smile:
"Let us ride home to camp and rest awhile.
Our bold exertions have today borne fruit;
There will soon be others to follow suit."

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The Maiden nudged the mare and headed west.
Her victorious troops had earned their rest.
The rescued couple hurried alongside
To accord her thanks, but not without pride.
"And what will happen to our children now?"
"Surely," was her reply. "They will somehow
Keep themselves busy in our sylvan camp.
Be sure they take care in the cold and damp."
They looked at her in absolute surprise;
The Maiden had a twinkle in her eyes:

"I thought such a precaution well-advised;
Your complete concurrence I had surmised.
Two well-armed women made a quick foray;
Your courageous brother showed them the way.
Your fine children are eager, I feel sure,
To rush into your arms and be the cure
For the agonies you have just endured.
Your happiness, I trust, is now ensured."
Were there ever two quite so thunderstruck:
With mouths wide open but tongues that were stuck?

The Maiden urged Flame to a steady trot.
"Shall we find out what cook has in the pot?"
A good day's work, thought Flame, growing queasy;
Next time, I doubt, will be quite so easy.

XII

A Veritable Feast of Plots

The night was black and heavy with thunder;
Jagged lightning tore the sky asunder.
Sheets of rain cascaded like waterfalls,
And beat like fists upon the castle walls.
One fierce bolt split an oak almost in half.
A ragged peasant clutched a mewling calf
And struggled down a wind-swept village lane -
With swirls of muddy water in her train.
Swallows and larks sheltered in tall church spires
While tired peasants huddled by crackling fires.

Their primitive huts had roofs tightly thatched;
Under the eaves, baby sparrows were hatched.
On the mud walls hung long wooden ladles;
Hungry babies cried in rough-hewn cradles.
Anxious mothers hushed them at swollen breasts
And waited in fear for unwelcome guests.
In the dread night, malignant spirits roamed:
Ghosts and fanged werewolves whose scarlet mouths foamed.
Eager to frighten weak souls that had sinned,
Devils raced through the night on a foul wind.

Drenched guards on the slippery ramparts cursed,
Their frayed nerves seared by every thunder burst.
The long day's travel had left them weary:
The least sound a danger in theory.
Their joints were stiff, and their clothing was soaked.
One comfort: too much rain for ghosts, they joked.
Three burly guards sheltered beneath an arch,
Complaining about the day's endless march.
"I've ne'er seen the King in such a hurry.
Did you see those blasted peasants scurry?"

"My aching, blistered feet are oozing pus;
That Captain Roger is a bloody cuss."
"Passing village after stinking village,
And only one did he let us pillage.
With barely time to snatch a yearling pig,
This royal progress may not yield a fig!"
"What a dangerous mood the King is in!
I wonder when the fighting will begin."
"As soon as we find that ragtag army,
We'll grind it finer than pork salami

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And swing the Maiden from a sturdy tree.
The survivors: enslave – though few there be!”
“Bloody true,” said the third praetorian.
“This is no place for a Gregorian.
The grim field of Mars will be burnished red
And fetid with the corpses of their dead.
A broad, crimson tide will untrammelled flow;
Their eyeballs will be eaten by a crow.
Their bodies will be raked by savage paws,
And their insides will hang from hungry maws.”

In the storm-blasted night, a lone wolf howled;
Two of the guards shivered; the other scowled.
The blood-thirsty braggart’s face blanched with fear;
And he whispered hoarsely, this craven seer:
“The Maiden, by report, keeps a werewolf,
Befriends wild beasts and teaches Beowulf.
Cutthroats and thieves she hangs by the dozen:
God’s holy truth, sworn by my third cousin
Who was told it by a money lender,
Who, in turn, heard it from a fruit vendor,

Who, if truth be known, was betimes informed
By a drunken friar, now much reformed,
Who ... “At which interval, the scowling guard
Hissed at them in a manner rough and hard:
“God curse each of you as a prating fool,
With toothless gums and gaping mouths that drool.
Ye jump at sounds and each leaf that quivers;
A beaten dog howls, you get the shivers.
What mockery will ye be in battle
Where the clash of arms o’erwhelms pale prattle.”

The slanting rain now turned to gentle drops
While on the ramparts strolled two seeming fops
Discoursing on the marvels of the night
And quoting poetry with all their might.
“Look yonder: such is what makes a dandy:
Garbed in fashion and spouting poetry.
The harsh din of battle will have them quake.
What sort of useless men does God now make?”
Furiously, the guard spat as was meet,
The fat globule hitting Sir Roger’s feet.

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The guard fell silent to no one's surprise
And bowed contritely to apologize.
The captain cursed them for worthless chattel,
Needing such prodding as grazing cattle.
He gave with his broadsword a vicious blow
To the first guard and bade him quickly go
Back to his own post to conclude his watch.
This simple duty he better not botch;
For should he from sloth chance to fall asleep,
He would Satan's company shortly keep.

The two left fell under the same duress.
Sir Roger's mailed fist was no soft caress
Of a lover intending to persuade;
Of lazy scoundrels he was not afraid.
The truant guards scurried to their places,
Abject terror stamped upon their faces.
The two fashionable strollers passed by,
And Sir Roger addressed them with a sigh:
"Three slackers, Your Grace, needing discipline."
England's High Constable said with a grin:

"Your vigilance, Captain, is commended
And in no manner should be amended.
The enemies of our King are legion
And doubtless infest this very region.
A love of justice, they are wont to feign;
But in John's stead, they dearly thirst to reign -
A thirst that high power alone can slake,
Which, if sated, will give our oak a shake
And rain on our heads most foul disorders.
They are nothing short of vile marauders.

The power of the King is absolute,
In which defense we must stand resolute.
By divine authority our kings rule.
Those who seek to rebel are but the tool
Of the Devil's host of fiendish warlocks
Who pull our trim beards and tweak our forelocks.
These witches are full of devilish tricks,
Tormenting us with unseen stones and sticks.
They amuse their master at our expense,
Our only protection: God's providence.

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Blackest of these rebels is this Maiden
Who in treachery is Satan's maven.
Blood she sips from a pure silver chalice;
Her heart overflows with wicked malice.
Her vaunted cause for us no good portends;
Chaos would result from what she intends.
>From obedience, the peasants would stray;
Their just taxes, she tells serfs not to pay.
To labor is the serf's moral duty;
For us, the contemplation of beauty.

So, good Sir Roger, maintain your sternest;
This combat will be in deadly earnest."
The knight crisply bowed and his best vouchsafed,
Stating with force that at the bit, he chafed.
Dismissing Sir Roger with a curt wave,
The Constable wished the others so brave.
Then to his companion in a low tone;
"Our venal King will reap as he has sown;
His depredations are too much to bear.
The crown, I shall before much longer wear.

But first, of the Maiden we must dispose;
Or else, I shall have but fleeting repose
And rule a fractious kingdom torn in two.
The Maiden dies before our plot is through."
The Constable's friend responded in kind:
"Is sly Count Gerard of similar mind?"
"I care not a whit if he be or not;
His life is forfeit to our modest plot.
The Maiden has Gerard most rightly cursed;
She'll hang him except she quarter him first.

His sanguine deeds have proved all too grievous:
His exactions surpassing onerous.
My vassals I rule with a steady hand,
But neither burn their homes, nor steal their land.
Without peasant crops, how would earls get fed?
The wheat and rye they grow becomes our bread.
All unruly serfs must be kept in line,
To work and provide what is duly mine.
Dispossessed peasants take to the highways
And threaten the calm meter of our days."

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"How do we rid ourselves of this King John?"
Questioned Stephen of Kent, trembling and wan.
"Mark you how richly the King likes to sup.
At a holiday feast, a poisoned cup
Will serve our hidden purpose passing well
And speed good King John on his way to Hell.
With both John and the Maiden neatly gone,
The crown will come to me before too long.
The loyal barons will not long resist.
Chopping off a head or two may assist

Them to speak clearly with a single voice,
Confirming me as their favorite choice."
"My Lord, you have in truth a subtle wit."
"Think ye so? Shall we go and by John sit?"
At this, Greek Zeus aimed his bolts. The rain poured,
And Roman Jupiter in outrage roared.
The small, woodland creatures ran for cover;
And dark spirits in the night did hover.



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Four men in furs stood near a blazing fire,
Gathered in an oak-beamed hall to conspire.
Gerard stood a bit taller than the rest;
He wore a dagger with a handsome crest.
Philip the Cruel had lost weight – and stank;
He put a goblet to his lips and drank.
The somber Duke of Essex stroked his beard;
He was, of all four, the most greatly feared.
The King sported a fancy, velvet cap;
He studied with care a crudely drawn map.

“Somewhere in Great Blaxford is where they hide;
To fight in those woods would be suicide.
We must devise a bait with which to lure
Them to a battle on the open moor
Where our well-trained knights will crush them with ease.
Their wounded will swing gently in the breeze,
Their eyes bulging and their tongues distended.
For such deeds was I from birth intended.”
King John’s voice echoed through the vaulted hall.
An incomplete portrait hung on the wall.

“What a lovely portrait of the Duchess:
Precise in proportion, a true likeness.
But pray tell me,” said John with a wry smile.
“Did she despair from sitting such a while?
Or was some unpaid scoundrel having fun?
For this fine painting was left quite undone.”
“A wicked wench, Sire, an evil strumpet;
She fled before I could sound the trumpet
And joined the Maiden in her woodland dell.
Skilled in a shrewd craft is this Annabelle.”

King John smiled slyly and began to speak
When into the hall burst a gruesome freak.
He was an ugly gnome of no great height,
With a bulbous head – an outlandish sight.
Red-veined was his thick nose from love of drink;
>From hard swearing, he was not one to shrink.
Coarse tufts of hair sprouted from longish ears.
His cynic’s wit, he turned on fools and peers.
His hot tongue over a cool mind prevailed;
And to avoid sarcasm, he always failed.

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Roderick – a name that outdid his size –
Addressed John in a manner most unwise.
“Most mighty monarch, of England master,
Whose fame and fabled fortune grows faster
Than a still hummingbird can beat her wings,
Than a viper envenoms when she stings,
Than Apollo rides on his daily course,
Than Cupid’s bold arrow can spend its force;
Whose character is so widely revered;
Whose retribution is so justly feared;

In whom cold logic and hot love dispute;
And the wisdom of whose gnomes, few refute;
What then is amiss in your royal house:
Where lords scurry through brush like moulting grouse?
As rank weeds have spring flowers over grown,
Or howling winds have grave disaster sown,
Word of this Maiden, like a fisher’s net
Cast over the swollen and briny wet,
Has reaped a grim harvest of discontent
And, unabated, shall your kingdom rent.

Thou art indeed a most merry monarch,
Whirling over fields like a meadow lark.
To hunt, to dance, to dress in smart fashion:
Herein lies your veritable passion.
Hast thou not ears to hear nor eyes to see
Thy subjects’ ever-growing misery?
Thy taxes are a monument to greed.
Havoc alone grows from such monstrous seed.
If you wish to draw the Maiden’s sharp sting,
Then peace and prosperity must you bring

To this bitter land where turmoil now reigns,
Fomented by barons with pea-sized brains.
Indeed what cunning fellows have we here?
Do they cook a plot or offer good cheer?
Sire, why consort with such villains as these?
Rather, find a consort who will thee please;
Or if no honest maid will thee marry,
At least with honest men pray thee tarry!”
“Enough,” cried John. “Hold thy venomous tongue;
Or by mine own hands, thy fat neck be wrung.”

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

The gnome, with a shriek, leaped high in the air,
Tumbled backwards and safely landed fair
On his dwarfish feet. "Sire, you surely jest.
I would prefer that dagger with a crest
But wonder how yon fine Count came by it:
Begging, stealing or his murderous wit."
Blanching, Gerard drew the crested dagger.
Roderick screamed, pretending to stagger:
"Help me quickly, Sire, else I be murdered.
Whose disloyal quest will then be furthered?"

What false chaos will engulf the kingdom?
Who would then give tuppence for a dukedom?
I alone tell thee the truth unvarnished -
And with neither herbs nor spices garnished.
Your Highness, take me for a prating fool,
Who can never abide the simplest rule:
A spiteful gnome telling more than he knows
And yet perceives not how the rude wind blows.
I beg thee spare me from this cold knight's ire:
His baleful heart of ice, his eyes of fire.

Look there how his burning ears pour out smoke;
He'll slice through my throat with a single stroke."
Roderick knelt down in supplication.
John laughed at the dwarf's wry fabrication
And started to command Gerard refrain,
But his words were drowned in a cry of pain
As the honed dagger pierced Roderick's chest.
"How do you like that for a clever jest?"
Sneered Count Gerard as the gnome struck the floor.
A last gurgle and he was heard no more.

Gerard viewed the dead body with distaste:
"My Lords, we have no further time to waste
On sorry jesters and rude curmudgeons.
That is why castles have lovely dungeons.
Why, I have in mine an exquisite wheel
>From which the bravest man cannot conceal
The deeply hidden secrets of his heart -
'Ere the soul from his body doth depart.
May I suggest we now discuss as planned
The royal business we had well in hand

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Until we endured a gross disturbance
By this wordy, wart-nosed, peevish nuisance?"
The King's command caused two slaves to appear
To cart Roderick to a shabby bier.
The King, for a mere instant, looked distraught,
Then calmly spoke in phrases clearly wrought:
"I shall repeat what I said just before.
Our skilled knights can, in open country, gore
Her army, like a furious, trapped bear
(Which roars fierce defiance mixed with despair

While savage dogs in a bloodthirsty pack
With dripping fangs attack it front and back)
Falls victim to a blind, relentless wrath -
Even having ripped a few dogs in half.
What then, my lords, shall be our sly deceit
With which to gull this maid in her conceit?"
"Why my liege," quoth Gerard. "How like you this?
Here lies a cunning plan with naught amiss.
The Maiden reveres her home ancestral
As a parish priest his dog-eared missal;

And she will surely go to any length,
Howsoever it might confound her strength,
To save the remnant of the old estate.
It is thus she will meet her wretched fate.
You must select a closely trusted spy
With an honest face but the skill to lie.
This brave man must be completely loyal
And devoted to the power royal.
Disguised as a lowly castle scullion,
Reeking of stale garlic and raw onion,

(The pungent relics of the kitchen trade);
He'll carry a tale to this errant maid
That he shall report to have overheard
As the midnight watch ate a roasted bird.
'Tis a tale that is sure to strike a spark
And make of our Maiden an easy mark:
A tale of my intended knavery
To burn her fields and into slavery
Sell all the peasants including children.
And thus we'll trap this bothersome Maiden."

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

The King bethought himself for a moment,
Thick fingers plucking his silken garment.
A wicked smile played on his tumid lips
As he stroked his chin with his fingertips.
"I have a brazen slave who'll do the trick:
Youthful, and learns anything in a nick."
King John gave a lackey a sharp command
And, back to the fire, waited chin in hand.
Through the archway stepped a dazzling beauty
Who knelt gravely to the King on one knee.

"Sarafina, you have sought your freedom;
We need your services for the kingdom."

XIII

Ormond

A band of knights through the dense forest rode;
Their pennons rippled, their bright armor glowed.
Huge chargers snorted as they trod the earth,
Straining at their long bits to show their worth.
The knights rode quietly in even pairs,
Speaking in French of far distant affairs.
"Je pense souvent de Paris maintenant.
Me demande si j'ai un deuxieme enfant."
"Le roi veut commencer encore une guerre,
Mais c'est a lui; ce n'est point mon affaire."

"Quel pays ridicule, surtout la cuisine;
Ce que je manque plus, c'est une bonne terrine."
Their topics, like the clouds, slowly drifted
As their moods by tiny inches shifted.
Trotting at first across wide, grassy downs -
With not a village, much less any towns;
They rode fast under a broad English sky,
Watched in silence by the few passersby.
But in time the forest wrapped around them
Like a wild vine twines round a growing stem.

Branches formed twisted patterns overhead,
And outlandish sounds caused increasing dread.
"Sacre Dieu, c'est un foret plus que noir;
Il y a des choses etranges on peut pas voir."
They spoke thus in a manner sore perplexed.
The goblins here have more than one man vexed.
Spirits abound of every type and sort.
Shades dismal and rapturous both cavort
To the ghostly notes of courtly music.
This ether shelters the tongue-tied rustic;

The dull apprentice asleep in the straw;
The rotund, greedy clerk stuffed to the craw;
The kind abbess in supplicating prayer;
The damsel riding a sure-footed mare;
A smithy, his forehead beaded with sweat;
The barren miser, not one to forget
Each farthing spent on a lamb or a shoat;
The shy beggar in someone's worn out coat;
A proud bishop carrying his crosier;
A fuller, a spinner, and a hosier.

Mischievous beings crowd the lucent air,
Dancing on noses and hiding in hair.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Elves, goblins, fairies and sprites by the score:
Some amusing, others worse than a bore.
Some had formerly known an earthly life;
But others, with which the dense air is rife,
Have known only an insubstantial world.
They weep to see human folly unfurled
Like a flag that catches each passing wind.
Only vain man does God's great love rescind.

Two woodland sprites began a rousing dance,
Unseen, unheard by these fair knights of France.
Their gossamer gowns rose and gently fell,
Shimmering with light and weaving a spell.
They reached for distant stars on elfin toes;
Hung in the air, and for an instant, froze.
They slid through the clouds in a long glissade -
The wind their stage, the dark trees a facade.
The dance ended, they took numerous bows
And ambled off on miniature cows.

A host of elves raised a flowered maypole;
Perched on top was a departed queen's soul.
She whistled and clapped her ringed hands with glee
Watching the elves dancing furiously.
They waved hued ribbons as they whirled around
The slender pole raised ten feet from the ground.
Primrose garlands wreathed their delicate heads
While purple clover bloomed in airy beds,
And juniper wafted a fragrant scent
That tickled noses from Devon to Kent.

A long, incorporeal trumpet blared
As serried ranks of honeysuckle flared.
Rows upon rows of bells in consort rang;
A chorus of shades hallelujahs sang.
The swarming multitudes grew strangely still,
And gentle murmurings replaced the shrill
But joyous cries of whirling, dancing sprites
And the vain boasts of long-departed knights.
With pomp advanced a sprightly procession:
A royal court returning from session.

First approached the radiant elfin Queen,
Gowned from head to toe in emerald green,
With the elfin King floating at her side.
They had that morning taken a brisk ride
Through the wide universe and briny seas
On tame seahorses and gigantic bees.
The Queen reveled in the raucous acclaim.
Her jovial husband felt much the same.
Their merry chatter the sprites now resumed
And a lavish feast avidly consumed.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

They dined on dried toads' ears and spiced bats' wings
Baked in a pie with beets and such fine things
As worms and grubs for a touch of flavor.
The grasshopper soup to fully savor,
They delicately sipped like a fine wine
Imported from the Moselle or the Rhine.
The main course of hairy spider and beans
Was followed by boiled dandelion greens
Garnished with beetles, acorns and fish scales:
Not to forget nuts and diced lizard tails.

The French knights trotted along undeterred;
The wraithlike goblins they perhaps inferred.
At their head rode an imposing figure,
Looking every inch the august seigneur;
But he was not an earl or haughty lord.
A wise man: he was by many adored.
"Halt!" An armed woman stepped into their path.
"Proceed no further, or ye know our wrath!"
Each startled French knight drew his tempered arm.
Annabelle then spoke with endearing charm:

"Before you strike, I pray you look about;
It would be, I fear, a most gruesome rout."
Grim-faced men and women, their bows drawn tight,
Could be seen sitting on limbs, at great height.
More archers stepped out from behind broad trees,
Aiming their arrows at the horses' knees.
Egbert's fighters came forward, fifty strong;
Each had a broadsword or battle ax drawn.
The calm French leader moved forward a pace
To look Annabelle squarely in the face:

"We desire no more than to pass in peace;
If denied, we shall fight without surcease.
And though we all perish, we doubtless will
Play much havoc, and many, surely kill.
Limbs shall we sever, the earth make bloody;
On these sanguine themes, I beg you study."
This Frenchman spoke his English passing well,
Smiling most affably at Annabelle.
"Ormond! Pray God my eyes do not deceive!
Put up your weapons so that none may grieve!"

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Commanded the Maiden, not concealing
A joyous grin and emotions reeling.
She rode up to Ormond and grasped his hand,
Raising it high in a manner quite grand:
"Welcome, dear friends, from across the wild sea:
To join our cause and share our victory!"
Only a few noticed her tears break out
Since just then was heard a clamorous shout:
"Robert! Robert!" Pierre burst out of the crowd.
"Mon petit frere!" he cried in a voice loud

Enough so that all that were gathered there
Warmly cheered and sang out: "Mon petit frere!"
And then a round of frenzied mirth took place
As English bluster met Parisian grace.

XIV

The Charter and a Declaration

Under the stars, a sylvan feast was held.
To stoke the fires, a thick-branched oak was felled.
Platters piled high with crisply roasted fowl
(Boar's tongue, shank of roebuck and fat hog's jowl)
Were carried around many blazing fires,
Which made of the treetops shadowy spires.
Bowls of apples and pears stacked in tall mounds,
Crusty loaves each weighing several pounds,
And earthy cheeses – all straight from the farm -
Were served by a man with one severed arm,

Cut off for some abominable deed
Like stealing bread for his children to feed.
The Brave Maiden sheltered all and sundry,
Leaving no man or beast to go hungry.
Pies and cakes in forms multitudinous
Left many fingers stained and glutinous.
Singing and frenzied dancing soon ensued,
For the entire company was imbued
With a noisy spirit of fun and hope.
Is this, thought Flame, a visit from the Pope?

The Maiden and wise Ormond walked apart,
Speaking of sad matters that touched each heart.
She told him what happened that dreadful day,
Of the vow made when she had knelt to pray.
She spoke of the great cause undertaken,
How she would feel lonely and forsaken;
But also of the joy of her stout band:
Sworn to restore peace to this ravaged land.
She described how the tiny band had grown,
How the first seeds of justice had been sown.

Her voice broke, speaking of her family.
Ormond then mentioned the word destiny.
Dispatches had reached him in rugged Wales
That caused him to run up wide canvas sails
And try in France careful diplomacy,
An occupation much like minstrelsy.
"How often have I hurled deprecations
At times so ripe with prevarications
That such a monster could slay your Father,
And no baron even seemed to bother.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

For the others, my rent heart grieves no less,
Not least thy Mother's worthy damsel Tess,
Whom I had eagerly hoped to marry.
On such thoughts, it were best not to tarry."
Gently touching his arm, the Maiden sighed
And wiped a falling tear she wished to hide.
"Ormond, dear friend, were my poor wits so slow:
To see you both talking and not to know?"
"Ah, Milady, we must have our secrets;
For mine, I feel sorrow but no regrets."

Ormond allowed himself a wistful smile:
"But now we have no more time to beguile,"
He said drawing from beneath his long cloak
A parchment scroll embossed with a broad oak.
Unrolling the parchment for her to read,
He said that within it lay a small seed
>From which a formidable tree would grow.
This seed, no matter what ill winds may blow,
Will inspire justice if it be nourished.
"As in lofty Athens, freedom flourished;

So this is a bold stroke to set men free
By limiting our puissant monarchy.
Establishing the rights of each estate
And the various duties owed the state,
This plan will unlimber the crushing yoke
Weighing now on both lords and common folk.
Herein we read many a principle
To make a just people invincible.
We here see created sound government
With courts, offices and a parliament

Without whose consent no laws will be made -
Neither customs levied nor taxes paid.
Reflect on this as a good beginning:
A rough, tangled wool that needs much spinning
Before an elegant cloth be woven;
A timber as yet by axe uncloven,
Which wants some dressing before set in joints
To construct a building of finer points.
Your Father called this script the Great Charter.
It was long his ardent wish to barter

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

With the King to revise the old regime.
And while he held this King in low esteem,
He believed the Great Charter would provide
A peaceful path to avoid regicide."
This last spoken in a voice thin and hushed,
Ormond's serene face grew anxious and flushed.
"Such an action only in extremis
Should John prove to be stubborn and heedless.
The Charter will be your inheritance;
Your Father trusted in your common sense.

A kingdom, he said, based on decent laws
Will be spared the savage, relentless claws
Of violence and Godless anarchy.
He wanted a strong but wise monarchy
To build a land of broad prosperity:
A truly good and just society
Wherein men and women may till in peace,
Milk their bleating goats and sell bags of fleece
Without an arrogant lord's by-your-leave
Or greasing the palm of a taloned reeve.

Good laws are founded on common consent;
We eschew a monarch thought Heaven sent.
But we need a king fair-minded and strong
Because a feeble king can cause much wrong.
Study with knitted brows your Father's gift.
Worship it not; neither give it short shrift."
"Intrepid Ormond let me read it through
Whilst ye make new friends and savor cook's stew."
It was at this juncture that Sarah chose
To nudge the Maiden with her wolfish nose.

"I see the many rumors be not false:
To call this warm-hearted wolf a dog, halts
At the frontier of imagination.
Yet as dog, she has some inclination.
Pray how came a wild beast to be so tame?"
"A story that merits not so much fame,
But which I can share with thee in due course.
There works, in this wood, more than human force."

Ormond started to leave but paused instead;
He considered briefly, nodding his head:
"I see they know not who you really are.
Your followers have come with you this far
And so deserve to know the simple truth.
Your bearing shows such high and innate couth
That this report will be taken in stride.
>From destiny, you cannot flee or hide."
Ormond nodded and then genuflected:
A gesture that she had not expected.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

"Dear friend, I give you leave to so pronounce;
My secret, sad to say, I must renounce.
But Ormond, reprieve me an hour or two -
Until the early morning's rosy hue
Expels the roguish demons of the night.
Let me stay the Brave Maiden 'til first light."
Ormond understood and left her alone.
Standing near, only Will heard her low groan
As she thought of past days of innocence.
She trod this path with no small reticence.

A refreshing night breeze brushed by her cheek.
She knew there was a sceptred crown to seek
And prayed duty's ship would not run aground
On ambition's shoal with her siren sound.
The soothing breeze brushed by her cheek again.
She exclaimed: "By almighty God, I can."
William paced tensely near a fading fire,
Filled with his unbounded love and desire.
He beseeched the Maiden on bended knee:
"I beg thee to love - if not marry me.

Long have I kept my yearning heart in check
And remained content to serve at your beck
And call. I firmly swore never to break
My wordless vigil, but this wrenching ache
I can no more endure - but must declare
My humble love and most reverend prayer."
The Maiden felt a tear spring to her eye
And bent down to the wolf, fearing to cry.
"Oh William, thou art my beloved friend;
'Twould be a joy to have some common end.

But my heart, unlike the hawk, is not free;
Marry, I must, one of my own degree.
I shall love thee as I did my brother;
But for thee, my heart can bear no other
Love. Yet, rejoice, I have in mind a prize
That will dazzle many a damsel's eyes.
I mean to see thee most happily wed;
But patience, Will, for now enough is said."
"I will accept no other love but thine;
No earthly bloom can replace one divine."

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

"Dearest friend, act not such a wayward part.
Who gainsays the ambitions of the heart
May also deny our flat earth's fixed place
And observe in the moon no smiling face.
Such a man decries as an old wives' tale
The miracle of herbs that never fail
To cure the pox or Saint Vitus' mad dance.
At the alchemist's feats, he looks askance
And prides himself in the name of skeptic;
But he is instead a carping cynic.

Let not gracious love with pride be tarnished,
Nor a hopeful heart too quickly banished.
For the true course of love is never known,
And seldom are man's foolish ways outgrown."
Will, like a philosopher deep in thought,
Struggled to learn the lesson she had taught.
He left her company to lift his gaze
To heaven's splendors and wish for the day's
Quick beginning. He had enough to do,
And zealous work his spirits would renew.

The cold-banning fires were now burning low;
The embers gave off a shimmering glow.
Annabelle ate a pear with a sly grin;
A slight trickle of juice ran down her chin.
Hovering near her like a flame-drawn moth,
Pierre quickly offered a silk, damask cloth.
Annabelle smiled shyly and touched his cheek;
Pierre felt all at odds - and suddenly meek.
There was a question he wanted to ask,
But silence enveloped him like a mask.

Hypnos now cast a wide, ensnaring net
Over travelers and new friends well met.
A dreamless fog of sleep immured them all,
And few got up to answer Nature's call.
Those that did saw an endless starry sky
And heard the faint notes of a cuckoo's cry.
How could they know what turn events would take,
Or what harsh fate would greet them at daybreak?
They went to sleep with the camp in order
And woke to find trouble and disorder.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Dawn spread slowly across the morning sky.
The Maiden woke in a mood gently wry.
She planned with Annabelle the day's affairs.
"How tasted last night those succulent pears?"
Asked the Maiden in an ironic voice.
"Quite sweet," was the reply. "They were most choice."
"Methinks you have found far more to admire
In pears than just their sweetness would require.
He is a brave and most courteous man;
Cupid's arrows follow no given plan."

"Truly milady, dost thou find him so?
I am so lost in love, I cannot know.
My heart is unanchored, my eyes gone blind;
Chaos reigns within my once steady mind.
I feel, with him, like the first day of spring -
But failing in speech and where to begin.
I am also far below his station.
Would loving me stain his reputation?"
The Maiden gave a shudder at this last
As if struck by deep winter's icy blast.

"Some indeed may not wed below their rank."
At these hard words, Annabelle's spirits sank.
"But for some, it is an outmoded view
Put in place to serve the privileged few.
Pierre, I expect, will marry whom he wills,
With scant regard for noble rank or frills.
But I would not taunt or keep you guessing
So know that you shall receive my blessing.
And now to take up some pressing business,
I saw yesterday a broken harness

And three costly swords in need of repair.
Pray see to these ere you taste the next pear."
Annabelle agreed, and her spirits rose;
But seeing Jonah's angry face, she froze.
"What report," asked the Maiden. "That disturbs
Your morning, and your placid humor curbs?"
"A poor scullery maid, the worse for wear,
Has taken flight from the King's beastly lair
With a tale that will cause your saints to rage
And be writ foul even in this harsh age.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Such enormity will curdle the milk
In a mother's breast. The King and his ilk
Alone could work such abomination
Whose horror exceeds imagination.
But enough, hither comes the tattered rag.
Let her relate whereof these villains brag."
Sarafina, her beauty hid by dirt,
Knelt before the Maiden in a torn shirt.
"Pity, oh great lady, this wretched cur;
I never meant to spoil his lordship's fur.

He had me beaten with a cat o' nine;
My gashes were treated with steaming brine."
Sobbing, she lifted her coarse shirt a crack
To reveal knotted welts across her back.
The Maiden let fly a furious oath.
Taking hold of Sarafina with both
Hands, she sought to know from this slender reed
What rank whoreson had done this evil deed.
Sarafina spoke in a rasping tone
That sounded almost like a dying moan:

"Noble Count Gerard with King John's consent.
I pleaded that it was an accident.
My pleas were in vain; he paid them no mind
And said I was lucky not to be fined."
Ormond had quietly joined the small group.
Listening hard, he let his shoulders droop.
The Maiden begged the poor wretch continue;
She felt a hot rage in every sinew.
"They set me to work carrying foul slops
And washing floors at night with tangled mops."

Pausing, she twisted her thick matted hair;
She smelt like a pig at a county fair.
"One night, I heard two scurrilous sergeants,
With mean, slitted eyes and mouths like rodents,
Boasting as they fed their sweating faces
How they would use their nail-studded maces
To crush the heads of the Maiden's peasants
And drive their children like hunted pheasants
Through the rolling hills and wooded valleys
To be sold as slaves on Turkish galleys.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

When they had done with murder and pillage,
They had firm orders to burn her village.
The march, they said, began on the morrow
And would end in the Maiden's great sorrow.
I waited in a closet out of sight
And fled the castle just before first light.
Milady, I beg of you protection;
I am now a maid without connection."
"No harm shall befall thee in this safe place;
Get thee breakfast and wash thy sooty face.

Pray God ye have come to us in good time
To abort this vengeful and monstrous crime.
I admire thee for thy valiant spirit
And your escape from that evil ferret.
Much of our vaunted aristocracy
Does not rise above mediocrity.
They care for little but to dance and hunt -
Their speech no deeper than a wild boar's grunt.
Nobility comes from a worthy heart
And may well be found in a common tart.

The will to virtue and to right a wrong
Depends not if a fellow's purse be long."
"Milady, thinkest me a prostitute?
A humble maid am I, but resolute."
"I meant not to speak directly of thee,
But more in a broad generality.
Think nothing amiss nor further on it;
Keep safe thy courage and noble spirit."
Sarafina bowed low and backed away
As the Maiden said, "We shall leave today

And attain the village in three days' ride.
All details to Annabelle, I confide."
Ormond thoughtfully took off his soft cap:
"Something is not quite right; I smell a trap.
Her story is simply too convenient;
And while Count Gerard is never lenient,
To whip a lass with a cat- o'-nine-tails
(A punishment next which her error pales)
Is even for Gerard far too severe.
I suspect some vile trick is hidden here."

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

The Maiden reacted with great distress:
"Your thesis could be right; I cannot guess.
But certain I am that we must not wait
Else we incur the risk of being late.
And, therefore, let us promptly all to horse;
My mind once firmly set, so too my course.
To God and justice, let us pledge our swords.
>From them alone, look we for our rewards."
Her companions nodded while she spoke low:
"Friend Jonah, a brief word before you go."

