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JA Howe returns with another lively tale.
This one has been previously published by the
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He Who Sang the Song

by JA Howe

They were at it again. Two of the most respected bards in the College were at story warring, and with a vengeance. The Guild's Master sighed vehemently.

The reason for his latest trauma was a five-foot-eight muscular swordsman, herald to Lord Montague of the Montagues of Black Lake. Montague - sometimes spoken of as "The Mountain" in whispers of awe - happened to be the fiancée of the daughter of Lord Quince who lived between Lockheaver Lake and Foin Mountains. His herald, Yeoman Wick of White Mountains, was small and annoying. However, he'd been heralding for so long that he had gotten the annoying heralds' habit of not thinking of ever toning it down a bit. It reminded the Guildsmaster of why he was glad that the Herald's Hall was on the other side of the field from the Bards' Hall.

"The family of the lady is being sullied, I tell you, and my Lord will not stand for it much longer, Master Owl," Wick was saying. "They are saying now that Lady Quince is a rat-faced, hard-nosed, bitch of a thing..."

Master Owl sighed again, wishing he could turn himself into his namesake for just a little while. Even the ravages of nature would be easier to take than this. "Yes, yes, I do know of what they speak, Wick; the gods only know my own journeymen and apprentices are constantly passing along the news to one another."

"Ah, but did you hear the latest, Master

Owl?" Wick leaned closer with a grin. "Someone got a view of her under the full moon..."

Master Owl raised his eyebrows. "Really...?" he began, before stopping himself. After a good *harrumph*, he looked back at Wick as sternly as he could. "It is well known that the Quinces are of were stock, boy," he said.

"Well, to be honest," Wick continued without seeming to notice, "what I'm truly concerned of is Milord's health. It's an all right thing to have a good tellers' war... I remember the War of the Roses, when Lady Gwen of Jewel Grove and Lady Horowitz were at each other's throats about their flowers."

"Ah, yes, I remember the War of the Roses... but things are different now," said Master Owl. "Ever since the Pope put across that Bull with regards to the matters of house versus house..."

"... because of that stupid boy, I recall," Wick nodded. Herald's knew almost as much gossip as bards did, since they traveled so much.

The original argument this time, as he recalled, had begun with some bragging. A couple bards had gotten drunk at Crossroad Tavern, so the story went, and started going on about the greatness of the deeds done by the houses they favored: Thassalworth Loch, which belonged to Montague, and Grand Gorge, a beautiful manse right near Swan Lake Falls, belonging to Sir Iris Van Grogen,

who was cousin of Lord Quince. Before Owl knew it, his entire college was picking sides and making wagers, and the two bards would rant it out every few months, and it went from simple bragging to nit-picking about the virtues, cleanliness, holiness, worthiness, and honor of house versus house.

It was really Henry's fault, because he had that knack for keeping things in his brain long after they should have been forgotten. And he kept grudges, therefore, for far too long. Henry should really know better by now, Owl thought; people say stupid things when they're drunk, everyone knows that. But Henry was dead, killed by a falling tree, and his apprentice Locksley had decided to take up the banner. Honorable of him, that Locksley, Owl thought bitterly, wondering if he could somehow get the man executed by "accident."

As for the matter at hand, though... "I will speak - again - with the bards in question," he said to Wick, who bowed.

"Much obliged, Milord." He turned smartly and went out. Lady Kent, Owl's mistress, came in as he left. She shot a look to the door.

"Again?" She set the dinner tray down on his desk and leaned over to give Owl a kiss.

"Again. You know, I would love to know what possesses these people to begin with."

She shrugged. "Why bother? Let them fight it out."

"No, it's house versus house now; they've taken to name-calling, apparently. Eventually blood will be shed. And that's my responsibility, because they are after all my bards."

"Yes, but that's what bards do, isn't it?" Lady Kent gave him a wicked grin. "They stir things up."

"You're sure you had nothing to do with this?" he said.

"Yes, dear, I am. The current Lord

Montague is much more to my taste. Less grumpy."

"Yes, well I'd be less grumpy too if I had found the Treasure of Pegasus the Pirate."

"Now, now, remember the edict: Bards are supposed to be unpaid, save in food, clothing, housing, and help."

"Sometimes I wish I had decided to be a Druid, and then I could turn myself into a bear and hibernate in the winter," he said.

Lady Kent laughed. "It's spring, dear, and not even a Druid can change that!"

"Hmph. I guess that this means I will have to speak with my bards. Could you call them up?"

"Oh, right away, Sir!" She curtsied with a wink and zipped out the door.

The two bards appeared in a bit, as Owl was finishing his meat. Locksley looked ready for a fight; he actually had a shiner already, the Guildsmaster noticed. Tiptoe was calm and smooth as ever. He had a reputation for a silky voice that enticed ladies, Owl knew.

"Already at it, Locksley?" he asked.

"Cousin of Lady Q in the hall earlier in t' day, M'lord."

Tiptoe tried to hold back a smirk. "That's what you get for insulting a lady," he said.

"Enough!" Owl growled at both of them and they stared at him, stunned. He pointed a finger to two chairs. "Sit."

They did.

"I've been lenient till now," Owl said. "But this fight has gone far enough. If I have to, I will send your titles to the King to have them revoked." Eyes went wide. "But I'm not going to, I think. Since you two have chosen to word-battle, then so you will do. Only one of you will be removed from the College.

"You will within ninety days of this date make peace between the two households. Within that time, invitations will be sent to

this place, to both houses. If I do not see every member of both present, unless there is a good reason, there will be damage.

“Keep in mind this, you two: a bragging match is one thing, but war between homes is another. You have stirred trouble where there was none before. You, Locksley, in choosing to carry on Henry’s grudge, have only made it worse when it might have been fixed long ago.”

“I was defending his honor, Master Owl.”

Owl banged a hand down on his desk. “I did not say you could speak yet! And as to defending Henry’s honor, I believe you have sullied it more than he could ever have done. If it were up to my temper alone, you’d lose your title right now and then you could fight all the wars you wanted to, if any lord would take you as vassal!” Locksley looked like he was going to say something and then thought better of it. Tiptoe’s face was concerned.

“This is what is going to happen instead: with the peace of both households regained, the two of you will sing and storytell till you can do so no more. You will bring out your finest, and whomever has a voice and the strength left at the end will keep his title. The other will leave the premises immediately, and will not return.” He looked closely at them. Locksley was just aching to fight this one out, he could tell, but was smartly keeping his mouth closed. “I’m doing this for the honor of THIS place, Locksley,” he said. “I am certainly not doing it for either of you two. Whoever wins, don’t think you will get out that easily: I’ll think up a suitable punishment for you, something comparable to helping the Druids mix potions, or being forced to babysit the younger apprentices - and believe me, if it comes to that, I’ll find the most annoying of them just for you.

“That is your charge now. So go on, you’re to head to your places immediately.” He sat down and indicated the door.

“Master Owl, may I say something?”

Locksley said.

“No, you may not.” Owl pointed to the door, through which Tiptoe had already gone.

For the next couple months, the upcoming fight was all that the colleges could talk about. From the Druids to the heralds to the bards, everyone was excited, outraged, interested in general about Owl’s decision on the subject. Wick went about with a smug look on his face, as if he was certain he’d been the cause of the whole thing, and there were quite a few youngsters within and without the colleges who followed him around and willingly did things for him. It became a joke in the College of Bards that Wick had more squires than he knew what to do with - oh, wait, Wick always needed something anyway...

The two households, thanks to a great deal of calming down and fawning on the part of the bards involved, did make a sort of tepid peace with one another. Owl was glad of that; last thing he needed was the King breathing down his neck about fighting amongst the nobility - not that it didn’t happen all the time, but if it were because of the bards, that was another matter. Usually it was just some girl, or some land, or some treasure. Owl knew that the current King wasn’t too much in favor of the college system and would rather go back to the old method, popular as this new more organized one was. All the specialists in one area, and you can always find what you need, was the motto of the King who’d installed this college in the first place.

“Hopefully this will work,” Owl said to Lady Kent the night before. Already they had had word of thousands of people coming to watch and listen to the event. Both Locksley and Tiptoe had been practically in seclusion getting ready, though Owl knew that Tiptoe had that day made a visit to the Druids’ college, probably to cleanse his soul with the trees. Locksley on the other hand, when he’d

been visible, had gone about talking himself up like a famous knight heading into battle.

The halls were full the day of the battle and Owl woke with a headache at the sound of one of his apprentices banging on the door. "Master, Master, the Queen's here!"

That got him up fast. "What do you mean, Her Majesty is here?" he said, wrenching the door open.

"She's just outside, Master, looking around; Locksley is talking..."

"I'll be down in an instant," he cried, grabbing his robe fast. Just as he galloped down the stairs, nearly falling, Owl heard Locksley's voice. He could not tell what it was saying, but today it had a particularly smooth tone. Owl burst the door open, taking a deep breath and stopping the overeager bard instantly. Not even Locksley would interrupt the Guild's Master of Bards in front of the Queen. Thank heavens for that, he thought.

"Your Majesty."

She let him kiss her hand. The Queen, tall and quiet, was an old friend of Owl's; he should have known that she would come if only for curiosity's sake. Her eyes twinkled. "Your Bard here was just telling me about the odds of the match. It's an interesting prospect, Master Owl."

"If I may, Your Majesty, I thought it the best way to restore peace in the land."

The Queen smiled wryly. "If only the lords of the land themselves were as quick on the mark as yourself, Master Owl, we might just manage that. As it is, I'm looking forward to this match." The Queen had always been a stout ally of his in maintaining this college, even though her husband cast it as much disfavor as he possibly could. Owl hoped with all his might that neither of the bards speaking today would have any tales she might find offensive - then again, he thought, Her Majesty did have an interesting sense of humor.

"Welcome to my halls, then, Your

Majesty."

Only a few hours later was the match, the duel, the "bardoff" as some had taken to calling it. Owl disliked the word immensely but then he disliked the entire business. He nodded to the other masters as they all took their seats. "An intriguing event, Master Owl," said Master Updike the Herald Master. "My folk have been at odds about it for days."

"Mine have taken to betting acorns," Master Catalina of the Druids' Guild said ruefully. "I've caught one or two at the ogham sticks about the subject too."

"I don't want to know the result," Owl stopped him before he could say. Catalina nodded. "Let's just listen."

And so began the greatest bardic competition since Paroll the Smith joined with Undine the Midwife of the Druidic College, and she commissioned the Bards to sing at her wedding and they couldn't decide between them who was most worthy of the honor. The bards in question today were under strict orders to not tell anything regarding the lords in question, but they made a good showing nevertheless. The "Tale of Bran" was told - in full - and countered by the lovely "Wooring of Etain." There was singing, too, in various tongues, and some poetry; they even managed to drag out some truly old stories of the valour of previous kings and ancient lords of days when the world was dark with plague. Tiptoe told a heart-breaking story of a knight who gave his blessing to an urchin who had the plague, who carried the poor thing twenty miles to a monastery where she might be well, and whose daughter one day married his son. Locksley countered with "The Saddest Poem in the World," about a bard who was thrown out by his friends, and lost all he had, and who managed to wreak revenge by calling on evil spirits, but who was fooled in the end anyway and killed himself. Owl's eyes narrowed listening to the

bard's enunciation, knowing that it was directed at him.

They sang and they said, and it went on for hours. Owl could hear the bards of his college muttering to themselves about proper turns of phrase and enunciation and satire. The apprentices, most of whom had never seen or heard such a thing as this event, sat wide-eyed and silent, enraptured by every word.

As they were both becoming hoarse, Locksley began to sing the "Song of Ages," a very old tune that most bards alive now didn't know. Owl pricked up his ears again; the reason that the Song wasn't taught anymore was that it had power...

Sure enough, the skies blackened as Locksley sang mightily as a hoarse man could. He danced around his opponent like a madman as he sang, and thunder crashed but no rain fell. Lightning shone in the distance. Owl stood up: this was more than enough. But just as he was about to give a cry and end this horror, the ground in the middle of the field began to ripple and shake.

A tree sprouted fast out of the ground there, and grew tall and fair, violet-leaved and silver of trunk. Tiptoe jumped back, falling to the still shaking ground as white flowers began to sprout from the delicate branches. And as Locksley cried the last verse of the Song, a giant lightning bolt came right down and split the tree in half, causing Tiptoe to crawl fast as he could out of the way.

The entire field grew silent, but Owl could feel the electricity among them all. Slowly, reluctantly, he gave a pre-stated signal and climbed down from the benches toward the field. "Locksley, I declare you the winner of this contest," he said as loud as he could, for he was trembling. There were legends about what the Song could do; he'd now seen it with his own eyes. The two halves of the tree bent and swayed in the fast

departing wind of the storm. The sky was clearing. He looked over sadly to where Tiptoe was. "Having sung the 'Song of Ages,' and done it well enough to cause creation itself, I name you the more powerful bard." He felt disgusted as he heard the murmurs of agreement and saw the smirk on Locksley's face. He sighed. "Tiptoe, you must leave the grounds immediately, you are revoked of your bardic title. I'm afraid this is the way it must be." He looked up into the stands where the Queen was, and she had a sad look on her face as well. But those were the rules. Tiptoe stood as best he could and made a bow to Locksley and Owl, and then to the people. And then he went away.

Locksley he called to his room next day, sighing sadly. It had been a sore loss; Tiptoe had by no means been the greatest bard he'd ever studied with, but he'd been a good and honorable man. "And as such, he did what was honorable and left without a fight; I'm sure he'll come to good ends," said Lady Kent that night, comforting Owl. Now he thought of that as his winner entered the room.

"Well, so now you've won - and given us a tree, too," he said. "I will appoint you to classes, of course..." As Owl went on with his talk, he began to notice Locksley had grown strangely silent. Finally, after having talked for half an hour without interruption, Owl couldn't stand it anymore. "Well, say something!"

Locksley shook his head and pointed to his mouth.

"Oh, you cannot speak right now? Well, I'm not surprised; I don't doubt Tiptoe is hoarse as well. Go drink some tea with honey and take the day off. I will see you tomorrow."

But the next day, Locksley couldn't speak either. Owl frowned. "Are you playing some practical joke on me?"

The mute bard shook his head

After a week of this, Owl himself took the bard to the Druids and explained the problem. He did not miss the half-hidden smirks on many of their faces, or the fact that many others left the place where they were rather quickly. Master Catalina himself threw the ogham, though Owl could see that he too had a certain look on his face. Owl sighed to himself, remembering that Catalina had pretty much told him before the match even began that he'd known how it would end up.

"Well?"

Catalina looked up. "He is mute, and mute he will remain," he said. "The 'Song of Ages' is not a song to be sung lightly, or with too much pride in oneself. If vanity is what you seek, then vanity you shall have; vain you were to sing the Song in a competition, indeed, thinking that the power of creation would make you the winner. More powerful you may be, but that is the last thing you will ever create. You will never be able to write or speak or even bear children. You have created enough. This is the word of the gods."

"There's no way to fix this problem?" Owl asked.

Catalina looked at him calmly. "No."

Owl realized that even if there had been a way, the Master of Druids would never have told him of it. He sighed to himself, and took Locksley back to the College of Bards. "You may remain here, if you like," he said, feeling a perverse responsibility towards the mute bard. "You can help with the apprentices, or work in the kitchen." Locksley gave a disgusted look but nodded. He was determined to be able to speak again, Owl realized.

"So you kept him?" Lady Kent said.

"He wanted to stay." Owl looked out the moonlit window. Locksley was down by the broken tree he'd made, bent over. Praying, probably, Owl thought.

Days went by as they would, and

months, and years. The moon turned over, the sun rose and eclipsed, and the apprentices laughed at and kicked at the bard. And the tree remained in the middle of the field between the colleges, strange and beautiful in its strangeness. Owl liked to go outside when he had free time and compose underneath it. The bard Locksley began to wear more and more ragged clothing as if in self-punishment for what he'd done, and people forgot eventually who and what he was. When Owl came across him in the corridors, the shabby figure wouldn't even always register with him as the man who sang the Song.

But the Man who Sang the Song became legendary in the colleges, long after his rags had been lost and he had departed from the world on his own way. Owl, the wrinkled and knobby Guild Master, would hear the story that came out of it with regret. He'd eventually heard from Her Majesty that she herself had taken Tiptoe in and he was now married to a cousin of one of her daughters, and had become thereby a wealthy lord who was famous for his stories at parties.

The tree also lived on, in its spot directly in the center of the field between the colleges. It lived on long after all the human folk involved in its growth were gone, and new apprentices would come to stare at it in awe as their masters told them of the dangers of singing the Song. Then they would often tell the tale of the one who had sung it, and become mute because of doing so. That was usually enough incentive for the students to never think of singing it again.