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Tales Newly Told

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Abstract

Beagle, Peter S. *The Innkeeper's Song*.

Tales Newly Told

A COLUMN ON CURRENT MODERN FANTASY BY ALEXEI KONDRATIEV

The publication of a new novel by Peter S. Beagle is always a noteworthy event and, given the consistently excellent quality of his production to date, one to be anticipated with eagerness and very high hopes. High hopes can, of course, be dashed; so it is with a certain amount of relief as well as delight that one can announce that *The Innkeeper's Song* (RoC, 1993) fulfills all of its promises — regaling us with that sense of vital urgency, of being at the cutting edge of life's most important experiences, that is so characteristic of Beagle's fiction — while taking Beagle's work into new territories of the imagination.

Unlike *The Folk of the Air* and the other stories about Farrell, *The Innkeeper's Song* is not grounded in the primary world, but takes place entirely within an invented universe. It is a place where magic and wizardry are commonplace, where archetypal forces manifest themselves with compelling immediacy; but — unlike the world in *The Last Unicorn*, where archetypes are themselves the prime elements in the narrative, giving it a timeless, somewhat folktale-like quality — there is a clear distinction between the archetypal realm and the everyday realm, between what is "natural" and "supernatural." The world has a consistent and believable geography, which the author does not explore in great detail but sketches in through allusions, vivid little tidbits that give an impression of historical depth and cultural differences. This is, of course, a science-fictional technique, and, although the story clearly belongs to the realm of high fantasy, it is clearly akin to a certain kind of science-fiction novel as well.

The world itself at times reminded me of Earthsea; or at least, a world Ursula Le Guin might have imagined. The "song" of the title is an unpretentious little ditty (quoted at the beginning of the book) describing the sudden appearance of three mysterious women — a black one, a brown one, and a white one — and their pet fox at an inn where they wreak various forms of havoc and at last make off with the stable boy. The speaker in the song is the innkeeper himself, and we are told that he is widely assumed to be the author of the poem. But fat Karsh the innkeeper — who narrates portions of the story that follows — quickly disavows any such authorship, claiming to be too much of a hard-headed businessman to be capable of such poetic flights of fancy. He is very much aware of his limitations (including the emotional and moral ones), but accepts them: there is no point, according to him, in trying to transcend the circumstances that have made him, if "not a bad man", at least a somewhat harsh and heartless one. And yet the story that he and the other characters begin to relate consistently assures us that we

are not truly bound by such limitations, that there is an energy capable of transcending them, and that even death for all of inexorable reality — does not limit us as finally as we think it does.

The tale begins by introducing us to "a village on a river in a southern country" where two young lovers, Tikat and Lukassa, are about to be married. They are very deeply in love, indeed assuming the archetypal role of romantic lovers, so that their story, at this point, has the quality of a myth, with the marriage anticipated as an inevitable conclusion. But the Kmood is quickly shattered, and the tone shifts abruptly, when Lukassa dies by drowning. Tikat, of course, is devastated: his life's single goal has been taken away from him. Then a strange woman — Lal, the black woman of the song — appears on the scene and raises Lukassa from the dead with a magical spell. Instead of restoring her to Tikat, however, she takes her away across the waste to the northern lands. Tikat, fueled by the single-minded intensity of his passion, follows them, suffering great physical hardship.

The paths of all the characters meet at last at the *Gaff and Slasher*, the inn kept by fat Karsh. Lal is joined by an old acquaintance, Nyateneri (the brown woman of the song), who is in constant flight from some rather odd assassins (she is also, as we find out halfway through the novel, not at all what she appears to be). She is accompanied by a fox capable of assuming a human shape (he turns out to be something a little more than a fox, but his nature is definitely vulpine, not human). Both Lal and Nyateneri have been the pupils of an old wizard, a figure so awesome that his name is never spoken (Lal calls him simply my friend, Nyateneri refers to him as The Man Who Laughs), but who is now — as they have discovered through dreams — in a lethally dangerous situation. Although they have no magic of their own and will have to confront the full might of extremely powerful wizards, the two women resolve to go to the aid of their old master, who befriended them when they themselves were in great need.

While they are staying at the inn, the stable boy, Rosseth, an orphan brought up by Karsh, falls in love with them. Caught as he is within the stultifying confines of the inn, and constantly abused by the innkeeper, he sees in the strangers the incarnation of his own unarticulated longings for freedom and self-expression. The women respond to him, after a fashion; but the situation is complicated by the arrival of Tikat, coming at last to the end of his quest for Lukassa. Tikat is in for a terrible disappointment, for Lukassa (the white woman of the song, "pale as the moon by day" by virtue of her death) is unable to forget the

(continued on p. 43)

Mount Doom towering above him, and then pitifully he began to crawl forward on his hands.

Sam looked at him and wept in his heart, but no tears came to his dry and stinging eyes. "I said I'd carry him if it broke my back," he muttered, "and I will!"

...As Frodo clung upon his back, arms loosely about his neck, legs clasped firmly under his arms, Sam staggered to his feet.... He took a deep breath and started off.
— *The Return of the King*

In many critical studies, Frodo's journey to Mount Doom has been likened to that of Christ's road to Calvary. The weight and enormity of the Ring is the cross that Frodo carries on a one-way trip that can only have, as far as he knows, a horrible ending. Extending the analogy, I suppose one might call his servant "Samwise the Cyrenian," who helps bear the terrible weight of the Ring along the "Via Mordorosa" (Oh, I'm going to get slapped for that!).

The original is a color acrylic painting on masonite. Since the color palette used in the painting is actually quite limited, there was little problem in shooting a black and white negative. Orthochromatic film, with which this negative was shot, will reproduce the relative brightness of a color and render it as a corresponding shade of grey. This holds true for all colors — except for red. Red reproduces as black in black and white films, which can cause real problems. However, the closest pigment to red that I used was Red Oxide, which is actually a rusty brown color. Because there is no scarlet or crimson in the scene, I was able to get a reasonably faithful reproduction on the black and white negative.

This is a very simple composition. The land forms rising on either side cup the figures within a bowl-like framing device. I wanted to show some of the cracks and fissures, as well as the ash heaps, on the plain of Gorgoroth, so I didn't put in as much fuming smoke as is described in the novel, which would have hidden them. There is a little smoke in the far background, but I'm not sure if it will be visible in the reproduction.

Page 21: Ungoliant Drinks The Light

by Sarah Beach

Then the Unlight of Ungoliant rose up even to the roots of the Trees, and Melkor sprang upon the mound; and with his black spear he smote each Tree to its core, wounded them deep, and their sap poured forth as it were their blood, and was spilled upon the ground. But Ungoliant sucked it up, and going then from Tree to Tree she set her black beak to their wounds, till they were drained; and the poison of Death that was in her went into their tissues and withered them, root, branch, and leaf; and they died. — *The Silmarillion*

What I wanted to capture was a sense of the light draining out of the Two Trees as Ungoliant drank up the sap. That is why there is still some light left in a couple of the branches of the Tree in the foreground. I also wanted to convey the Unlight of Ungoliant, to try and have the spider "radiate" darkness, as it were.

Tales Newly Told (Continued from page 41)

experience of dying, which has cut her off from the world she once shared with Tikat: his love, projected with such force at someone she no longer is, now terrifies her.

This web of struggling loves and loyalties comes at last into the shadow of the world-shaking conflict between the old wizard and his renegade pupil, Arshadin. The master has loved his pupil too much, and without moral discrimination; and Arshadin, like many a spoiled child, has turned on his doting parent-figure in a kind of adolescent rage. Such intense love, so thoroughly betrayed, can only yield to an equally intense despair; and when a wizard with godlike powers descends into despair, the world he inhabits is endangered. Only the frail, bitterly human loves of the other characters are left to stand against the impending catastrophe. All the characters have to perfect their experience of love. Events in their past make it difficult for Lal and Nyateneri to articulate their feelings for each other, which are made even more complex by their relation to their master. The old wizard's love for Arshadin is marred by lover-indulgence, and cannot be mended unless it submits to death in some form. Tikat's love is strong and unswerving and makes him capable of great feats of endurance, but it is too full of projection, too full of his own self. Rosseth's love is perhaps the purest and least problematic, although it will have to learn balance and restraint as it matures. The fox, of course, is motivated entirely by self-interest — like many trickster-figures, he brags about his selfishness — yet even he discovers that he can be compelled by a force greater than that.

The subtlest — yet also the most poignantly moving — of the transformations, however, involves fat Karsh himself: by the end of the story, the book's title has acquired a whole new meaning. Beagle has entrusted the narration of the tale to all of the characters in turns (except for the wizards, whose inner thoughts remain hidden to us), as though the events were being remembered many years later. This technique is not used to provide Rashomon-like descriptions of the same events from different angles, but instead propels the story briskly and in essentially linear fashion through a succession of rapidly shifting viewpoints, rather like a ball being passed from hand to hand on a playingfield. Without resorting to exaggerated stylistic effects (no odd dialects, no over-mannered speech patterns), Beagle has given each of the narrators a distinct personal voice, vibrant with its own unique experience. This gives the entire novel an extraordinarily rich texture. The interdependence of love and death: love is stronger than death, yet death is necessary to love — by focusing on these matters Beagle seems to have come full circle back to the themes that concerned him in *A Fine and Private Place*, over thirty years ago. Yet now they are articulated with a force and urgency that the earlier novel, for all of its memorable charm, lacked. *The Innkeeper's Song* is likely to become established as a classic of modern fantasy, and will certainly repay many re-readings.