

THE YULETIDE GIFT

It was deep midwinter just days short of his eighth nameday when they told Edgar FitzJohn his father was believed dead. His stepmother came to his bedside in the dark of the night. She came alone, and with her glorious hair unbound. When he sat up blinking she bent to kiss his brow.

“Can you be brave?” she whispered.

“I can try.”

She reached to ruffle his straight, black hair. “Do not give up hope. If you will trust me then we can hope that all will be well in the end.” She showed him a little charm such as women wear on bracelets, in the shape of a Welsh harp. “Should anybody show you such a token as this, then you may trust them.” She pulled him into her arms and hugged him fiercely, before stealing away again.

The next morning, he awoke to a great bustle. Mother’s father and her brother had arrived from the city, and it seemed to Edgar that the place was full of big red-faced blond-bearded giants who were most efficiently taking over. He thought to question, but his stepmother’s closed face, and her visit in the darkest hours, kept him silent. His grandfather looked down at him, and smiled a wolffish smile.

“Isn’t this one about ready for fostering?” although his voice seemed casual, Edgar could sense some deep inner excitement.

“He is indeed,” Mother answered coolly. “In fact he leaves on the morrow. He goes to my lord’s sister in Lancaster.”

Grandfather chewed his lip and spluttered, but could think of no useful response. Uncle Aled moved to smooth over the situation. “Excuse our father. It is the surprise. We did not know of this.”

Mother lifted one of her smooth, white shoulders. “How should you know? The arrangement was made long since.”

On the morrow, Edgar set out, clad warmly in wool and leather, mounted on a surefooted pony, and guarded by six of his ‘grandfather’s’ surly Saxons. They rode in uncomfortable silence.

After spending the night at a wayside inn, the party entered the forest at first light. One of the Saxons shivered.

“I mislike this place,” he growled.

“It’s worse in summer,” the oldest member of his escort opined, “at least you can see what is coming to attack you when the trees are bare.”

Of course he was wrong. They saw nothing until the dark figures sprung up out of the loam. It was a brief, dirty, fight, which left four Saxons dead and two wounded, but walking. Edgar found himself pulled firmly from the back of his mount and pushed down into the dark soil. He might have fought, but his captor showed him a ring in the semblance of a Welsh harp. The dark men quickly caught the Saxons’ horses, but somehow Edgar’s pony seemed to escape them and it careered off into the forest dragging something in its wake. The least hurt of the Saxon warriors looked at the fleeing pony with something like dread in his eyes.

“Do you know who that is?” Receiving no answer he ploughed on.

“That’s the grandson of Eudric the Red, that is.”

“Was,” one of the folk grunted. “Will be dead by now. If you want to stay alive, walk.”

The two Saxons walked, and nobody moved until they had gone out of sight and earshot.

After that things happened so fast that Edgar could only remain quiet and allow himself to be borne along on a human tide.

Back at Castle Borso, the chatelaine shut herself in her rooms to mourn the death of her husband and his son, whilst her father and brother dug themselves firmly into position as the castellan and master at arms.

This matters stood a full twelvemonth later, when the Castellan intercepted a letter addressed to his daughter. He read it and hissed his displeasure. Aled looked up from where he sprawled on the hearthrug in company with his wolfhounds.

“What?”

The old man threw the letter into his lap. “We are to make ready for visitors.”

“Visitors indeed. Now I suggest you seal this up and have it delivered to my sister. We don’t want her to be able to tell the Queen’s Majesty that she did not receive it.”

His father grunted, but obeyed.

What the Queen’s letter neglected to mention was that she was bringing John FitzJohn with her to reclaim his property. Those Saxons

who survived the purge were turned, naked into the cold with prices on their heads.

As the castle prepared for a joyous Yuletide, the lady looked into her husband's deep dark eyes and smiled a secret smile.

"Will you come for a ride?"

He looked puzzled but readily agreed. They set out with only two trusted guards, one of whom led a laden packhorse.

John quirked a mobile brow, and his lady laughed, high and clear.

"These are people to whom we owe a debt." Then she closed her mouth firmly and urged her mare to a canter. They followed a rough track up out of the fertile valley and onto the springy moorland turf.

It was about an hour's ride in the crisp winter air until they came to an isolated farmstead. In the yard a dog barked, and a broad-shouldered tow-headed man came to the gate. Seeing who it was, he relaxed, and bowed before opening up to admit his visitors. He whistled two notes and a tall dark-haired youngster came charging out of the house. John stared for a second, then all but fell from his saddle. In an instant, he had the boy in his arms and was laughing and crying at the same time.

"They told me you were dead."

"Aye. And they told us you were dead, Father. But Mother didn't trust them. So she hid me."

Joh turned to his wife. She dimpled demurely.

"I told you I had a Yuletide gift for you, my love."