

Weird Tales

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No Other Man...

David N. Keller



"The headless stump bled a white blood that shone on the floor of the cave."

"**W**HY come to me with your worries?" I asked the old people, rather petulantly. "Any man could find your daughter for you, and there are many good men in your own land."

I was irritated.

Ever since the time I slew the dragon of Thorp's Woods, the people of Cornwall thought that all they had to do in time of trouble was to come to

me. For a while I tried to be considerate; I really thought at one time that perhaps it was part of my duties as Overlord of the land to kill serpents, destroy giants, and in every way make the country a pleasant and kindly place to live in. To live up to these high ideals gave me little leisure to devote to my special studies, and, often, I was no sooner back from one adventure and comfortably clad in my

velvets, with my nose between the pages of a book, than a fresh demand made it necessary to put on my armor again and sally out to rout a few more robbers or cut the head off another slithering snake. It was hard to be so disturbed from the reading of a good book, and in wintertime the harness and armor were so cold that only after some hours of wearing did my goose-flesh subside and enable me to ride my charger with any comfort.

Now, for some weeks, everything in Cornwall had been quiet. If there were any dragons remaining, they thought it best to hide in secret rock caves, while all the robbers had fled to Wales and Brittany, and the giants were all rotting in their gore. As far as my sway extended, all was quiet, and I felt that I had well earned a rest. It was cold, the roads were deep in mire, the sky overcast; my good steed was comfortable, knee-deep in straw and munching the best grain my peasants could raise; I had large logs in the fireplace, new cushions to sit on, a woolen shawl for my knees and another for my shoulders, old wine in the glass, a joint of meat on the table and a book in my hand; why should I worry about wrongs done in Wales or lands of the Scot or Irish?

Then, after but a few days of comfort, these old folks came. They brought with them a long parchment, bearing the scrawl and seal of the King of Wales. That did not mean much to me, for they were changing their kings every month, but it had so impressed my men that they had brought the old folks to the door of my library, and when I refused to see them and ordered them fed and put out of the castle, they raised such a lamentable cry that, from sheer necessity, I gave way to their moans and ordered them in to tell their story.

They were wet and cold; so I gave them a place by the fire. And they seemed hungry; so I ordered meat and wine brought them, and I told them, for the sake of good Saint Jerome, to

fill up and dry up first and then I would listen to what they came to say to me. Thus I gained an extra half hour of time to read my book, and when I saw this much time slip down the narrow channel of the sand-glass, and found that in this space of time I had translated over four lines of Latin, I was much cheered and almost tempted to be civil to the old folks.

The story they told was a familiar one. Their daughter had been taken from them; they believed that she was being held a prisoner in one of the mountain caves a dozen miles from their hut. What manner of man or beast had done this foul deed they knew not; there were strange tales about the things that lived in that mountain. They had been to see the king of their land, and he had asked in vain, among all his knights, for one to rescue the maiden; they had all refused to undertake the adventure; then he had thought of writing to me concerning the wrong done these old folks and asking me to right it. As they became more excited, they raised their hands and swore that never was there such a lovely girl as their daughter, nor so pure a one, and why had the saints permitted this terror to come to her?

Naturally, I was sorry for them. Yet it seemed to me that I was being imposed upon and that the knights of Wales ought to attend to their own giants and dragons; so, when they finally came to the end of their tale, I gruffly said:

"Why come to me with your worries? Any man could find your daughter for you, and there are many good men in your own land."

At that they cried out that I was wrong, and the woman said over and over again, "No other man. *No other man!* NO OTHER MAN!" which was all silly nonsense, being foolish and far from the truth.

However, it all ended in my telling them to go to bed and rest and that on the morrow I would return with

them and see what could be done concerning the safety of their daughter, though I doubted if she were yet alive; so, sending them off to a good night's rest, I ordered fresh logs put on the fire and some spiced beer warmed for my comfort, and started in to read the adventures of a good knight Hercules, who was either a better fighter or a better liar than I ever could hope to become. And, finally, I also sought the warmth of a feather-bed, and, disturbed in mind, waited for what the morrow would bring.

THE next day, in a drizzle of rain, we started for some town in Wales, the proper sounding of whose name I never did learn. The old dame and her man rode slowly ahead on two sorry nags, while behind them I rode my favorite stallion.

The woollens and leathers I wore under my armor had been well warmed and greased before I started, but the day was chill and in no time at all I became depressed over the cold of the harness on my back. So I tried to pass the time reciting Latin verbs, which made the old folks shiver and cross themselves for that they thought my mutterings to be imprecations and incantations against the power of the Evil One; and now and then my stallion reared in the air and neighed, perhaps for his warm stall and his hearty meals of grain, and perhaps for other things, but I gruffly commanded him to come down to earth on all fours.

So on we drove for the space of five days. At night we slept where we could and by day we rode and suffered from the chill of the cold rain. I had some gold with me and so could pay for the best, but even the best was sorry worst, and ever and again I sighed for my velvets and my fire, good beer and Latin manuscripts. Yet an end finally came, and we arrived at the house of the old man and his wife. It was raining as we came there, and the sky was dark and low-

ering; yet through the gloom I could see the dark mountains far in the distance, covered with mighty trees and holding in their mysterious fastnesses this supposedly lovely daughter and the unknown monster that had torn her from her parental home.

When the news of our arrival was spread through the little town, the neighbors came, no doubt, to see the Giant-killer, and whether they were disappointed in my looks, I wot not; at least, they did not say so. However, since I had come all this long five-day journey to accomplish another wondrous feat of chivalry, I was glad to have these simple folk to talk to, for I wanted to know all that there was to be known about the land and the special monsters it harbored, and just how this young maiden had been taken, and what manner of fiend it was that had done the deed (for I found that such preliminary investigation was of the greatest value in winning a victory). Also I was glad to have some of the simple folk to carefully dry my armor and rub it with lard and oil, and also to rub over my cold muscles a special holy oil which came to me in a gold vial from the Holy Land, being part of the lard boiled from a great saint during his martyrdom, which lard was very comforting to me, both in a physical and a religious manner.

All of the men had a different tale to tell about the monster. None had actually seen it, but all agreed that it was a serpent, twenty yards long, a shape like a great unicorn, a headless man, a bull with the head of a man, a real dragon like unto those of Gobi, or a three-legged giant. All agreed that it was a mighty horrid thing, that could easily kill a man, simply by blowing a flame of fire in his face. The usual weapons were powerless: steel could not cut, lance could not pierce, mace would not crush. The more they talked, the more peculiar I felt and the more clearly I saw why the knights of Wales were too busy

to attend to this matter. It was really an awkward situation.

Yet they were all mightily cheered over my being there and said repeatedly that if any human man could kill this monster, the Giant-killer of Cornwall could, and I told them I was sure I could find the maiden and rid the land of this foul animal, be it man, beast or demon. And at that, a very old Jew bent before me and humbly thanked me and said that he would give me fifty gold crowns if I did so, as he was betrothed to this maiden, having purchased her from her father, and that the wedding would have been consummated by now had the fiend of the mountains not taken her.

I looked at the old man, his withered face and shrunken frame and scanty white hair, and the more I saw of him the less I liked him, and thought to myself that perhaps the girl was better off in the mountain than in his house. In fact, I suddenly grew sick of the whole adventure and demanded that I be taken to my room and left to sleep till the morrow. And so they did to me, and a restless time I had, missing sorely my feather-bed, as I tossed on a couch of corn sheuks.

The next morning the entire people of the town gathered to see me put on my armor, and after that was done and a quart of beer drunk moodily (for it was poor stuff), I sadly mounted my horse and rode toward the mountain, the priest going ahead, singing a prayer, and the old man and woman on either side my horse, and the old Jew running on behind, urging me to be careful, and that he would surely give me my fifty crowns.

The old woman kept repeating, "No other man would do it. No other man!"

"Would be such a fool," I added in a whisper. "No other man. Why, a thousand men I had read of would have been glad to do such a deed—only, I, who had cleared my own country of such monsters, was a fool

to do such dirty work for the men of Wales."

And the old man and the priest and the Jew took up her chant, "No other man would do it—no other man." Yet, finally, we came to the edge of the wood and a mile from the side of the mountain, and they paused and said they would go no further with me but would go back and wait in prayer for my safe return.

THE trees were so close together that I could not ride my charger; so I got off and tied him to a tree, and then I looked into the wood. It was dark and feyish, yet through the trees came glittering, glimmering gems of sunshine, and far away I heard a thrush sing and a squirrel chatter in the tree, and I knew then that I was in the Enchanted Forest, for here was springtime and pleasant weather. It being warm, I took a view of the situation and saw that I could not fight well with all the steel on me; so, back to my horse, and there I made myself comfortable, and when I next wended woodward I had on my woollens, and my great sword hung on my back, my shield on one arm, a dagger in my belt, and a lovely woods flower in my right hand.

Thus, on to the rocks, and nearing them I heard the sound of singing, and the song was about love and roses and ladies' tresses, and I marveled at this, and knew that it was magic, and further on I wandered, and finally came to the singer, and at that I was greatly frightened. For I knew that now I was in the midst of a great mystery and a mighty magic. For this evil beast who had stolen the poor girl from her parents had, in preparation for my arrival, changed, by his cunning, his so ugly body into that of a lovely damsel, and was waiting there to deceive me, and, when I was unaware, to kill me with his poisons and his powers.

I knew that it was useless to cut such a being with sword or pierce

him with dagger. His body was so much air. In such a conflict, weapons of ordinary use were worthless. So I carefully put off my sword and my shield and my dagger, and, holding the woods flower in my outstretched hand, I closed in to the conflict.

"Though thou art a mighty magician," I cried, "I command you to give to me the poor little girl you stole from her parents on Ash Wednesday. Give her to me and I will not harm you, but if you persist in your evil desires, I will match my magic with yours and overcome you."

"Who are you?" demanded the creature, "and why are you here?"

I could tell from the way he talked that he was impressed by my threat.

"I am the Overlord of Cornwall, Cecil, the son of James, the son of David, the son of John, and back even to Saint Christopher, who loved before he became a saint. For years I have ruled in Cornwall. You may be interested in knowing that I am the one who killed the dragon of Thorp's Woods. I destroyed seven slithering, shimmering snakes in Ireland. Alone and unaided I destroyed seven Moors who threatened the reputation of one of our ladies. On twenty-three gallows in my land hang, bound in chains, and coated with tar, twenty-three bandits whom I caught and caused to be punished for their crimes."

I paused to watch the effect of all this. There was no doubt that the miscreant was impressed. So I continued:

"So it was that when this poor girl, who, by the way, was to marry a very rich man, was stolen from her parents, these simple folk appealed to the King of Wales, and he pled with his knights to rescue her, but they all refused, being too busy. So he sent a special letter to me, and for five days I rode over the worst roads possible to effect this great deed. I think that you had better submit quietly and let me restore the girl to her parents and to her future husband, because, if you

refuse, I will have to fight and overcome you, no matter what shape you may assume."

At that the monster started to cry, "She will never go back and marry that miserable old man. It would be better for her to die."

I realized at once that this was simply a part of the deception that the horrific monster was trying to impose on me with; so I grew stern.

"She must go back!" I said harshly, and twirling the woods flower in my hand to distract his attention, I advanced on him, for it was my purpose to suddenly spring forward, take him by the throat, and squeeze him to death before he had a chance to change his form from that of a lovely woman to his usual one of a dragon or six-legged scorpion.

The monster looked at me. The eyes he had assumed were blue, the face fair and smooth as a rose petal, but his mouth was a lovely red bow. The body he had taken for a disguise was fair, and, under the silken robe, swayed with the seductive curves of a Grecian Aphrodite. Suddenly he started to cry.

"No other man," he sobbed, "would make me go back and marry that old Jew. No other man——"

But by then I had jumped forward and crushed him in my arms.

SOME days later I came out of the dark forest. My poor charger had eaten all the grass within his reach, had broken loose, but, true to his master, had remained near the armor. I slowly put the heavy pieces back on, being minded to thus return to the town. Then I mounted and drew the damsel up in front of me and thus we slowly rode back to the town.

To my surprize I was met there by a great concourse of armed men. It seems that the King of Wales and his knights, hearing that I had gone into the mountains on such a grim adventure, had gathered to my rescue, and, had I not appeared that day, would

have searched for my bones to give them Christian burial. My sudden arrival made such a search unnecessary; so there was nothing to do but make merry over my return from this so great adventure, and allow the feasting and merrymaking to take the place of solemn masses for the peace of my soul.

At the banquet table I commanded that the damsel sit next to me and said that there were very necessary reasons why this should be done. Then came the feasting and the talking, the Welsh being very brave at both of such indoor sports. The King of Wales told how proud they were to have the Overlord of Cornwall take part in such a glorious adventure; the father of the girl told of his joy and thanksgiving for her safe return; the aged Jew handed me a silk bag with the fifty gold crowns in it as the reward he had offered, and then he begged the monarch that the wedding go on while all the world was there and that he would give fine presents to every one of the guests. But I rose in my place and said:

"I can not let this Jew die!"

"What do you mean?" asked the king.

"To explain," I replied, "will be a pleasure to me, though I can not do so without telling of my overcoming of this great Welsh monster in the mountain cave. If, in the telling, I seem at times to be boastful, you will pardon my pride; for, really, the deed was a great deed and well done. I do not want to tell all the details, but it will be necessary for me to do so in order to show why it is impossible for the Jew to marry her. Because he is a good Jew and I do not want him to die.

"When I came to the woods I heard a horrific hissing and knew by the sound that the monster was trying to frighten me. So, leaving my horse, I advanced carefully, and as the wood grew darker I saw the flashing of lightning and these flashes came from

the eyes of the dragon. Finally, I came near enough to see the creature, and you may judge of my surprise when I tell you that it was a worm, many feet long, but, instead of feet like a millipede, it had arms and hands, and each hand grasped a weapon, sharp as a dagger and poisoned with deadly dragon's doom. There were three heads, and I might remark here that a three-headed monster is not new to me, I having killed several of them in Gorkiland, but in this case only one had a face on it; the other two being smooth of features, save a mouth that dripped blood and spittle. It had no sign of fear and rushed on me, and for over an hour I had need of all my skill defending myself from its weapons. I used, as is my wont in such cases, my two-handed sword and finally succeeded in cutting off one of the heads. It howled mournfully and ran into its cave.

"I rushed after it and was not surprised to find a large cavern well-lighted with the baleful light from the monster's eyes. Also the headless stump bled a white blood that shone on the floor of the cave.

"The fighting now was hard, because I was constantly stumbling over the bones of maidens he had previously ravished and devoured. At last I snipped off another head, and now the monster retreated into a still smaller cave. Chained to the wall of this cavern was the little girl who had been stolen from her parents and who would have been destroyed, body and soul, at the next full moon, had I not come when I was called for.

"The dragon now assumed the shape of an old magician and, breathing harshly, asked me to leave him at peace, offering to share the beauty of the maiden with me if I did so. Of course, I scorned such a dastardly offer and, calling on him to defend himself, I rushed on him with my dagger. Seeing that he was doomed, by the power of his magic he metamorphosed himself into a bubble of

air and vanished down the maiden's throat.

"I have brought her back. The monster is still within her, waiting for a chance to come forth and destroy all of you good people of Wales. If this poor maiden married the Jew, the monster would sally forth on the bridal night and tear him to pieces. If she remains here, the whole village is in danger. Only is the world safe so long as he realizes that I am close at hand to strangle him to death at his first appearance."

The audience shivered and seemed stunned by my tale.

Finally the king asked, "What are your plans? And why should you undergo such a risk to save the life of a Jew or of the simple folks of this village?"

"I propose to take the unfortunate girl with me to Cornwall. I shall watch her closely on the trip. If the monster comes from out her, I will at once kill him and return her to the parents and the Jew. If he still sulks in her midgut by the time I reach Cornwall, I shall give her rare medicines I know of and thus, gradually, the monster will die within her. I am a lone man, without wife or children, and it is better for me to take this great risk, even if I die for it, than to have all these good people die in one night of slaughter. Besides, I know a lot about devils and their manner of action, and thus it is best for me to keep the maiden near me till this fiend is thoroughly destroyed."

"Oh, kind sir," cried the mother, "how can we thank you? You are too good to us. No other man would have done all the wondrous things just for strangers; I will feel so safe with my daughter in your care."

And the Jew came up to me on his knees and humbly handed me a gold chain and thanked me for saving his life from a horrible tearing at the hands of this monster.

Now it was late in the afternoon, yet, as the day was warm, I insisted that I depart for Cornwall; so up I got me on my charger, and I put the maiden up in front of me, and in back was a bundle of presents of jewels and fine silken stuffs from the king and his knights, and I wore all my armor, save my helmet, which I had tied to my saddle and wore instead a little velvet cap.

So we said a kindly farewell to all those people.

The king rode down the road with me.

"Art sure, dear sibling," he asked, as he prepared to leave me, "art sure the damsel hath the devil in her?"

"Certainly," I replied, very seriously.

"Then she be a true woman," he answered; "for all women I have ever met are thus inhabited."

With this he winked at me, and, turning, trotted his horse back to the town where his company waited on him.

Ruth and I fared on through the summer afternoon. More and more as the sun lowered in the kindly sky, she leaned heavily against me, and now and then she sighed, as she looked up at me with those blue eyes and asked: "Dost see aught of the monster peering from my mouth?"

"Nay," I replied, holding her closer so that she need not be frightened.

"Yet I fear me that it cometh out. Drive it back, my heart!"

And so I did with kisses.

How stubborn that devil was! How hard to drive back! . . . So, the maiden was satisfied.

Finally, she gasped.

"No other man," she whispered, "would have done it as you did."

"No other man," I echoed.

And once again I drove the devil back from her mouth.