

# STIRRING SCIENCE STORIES

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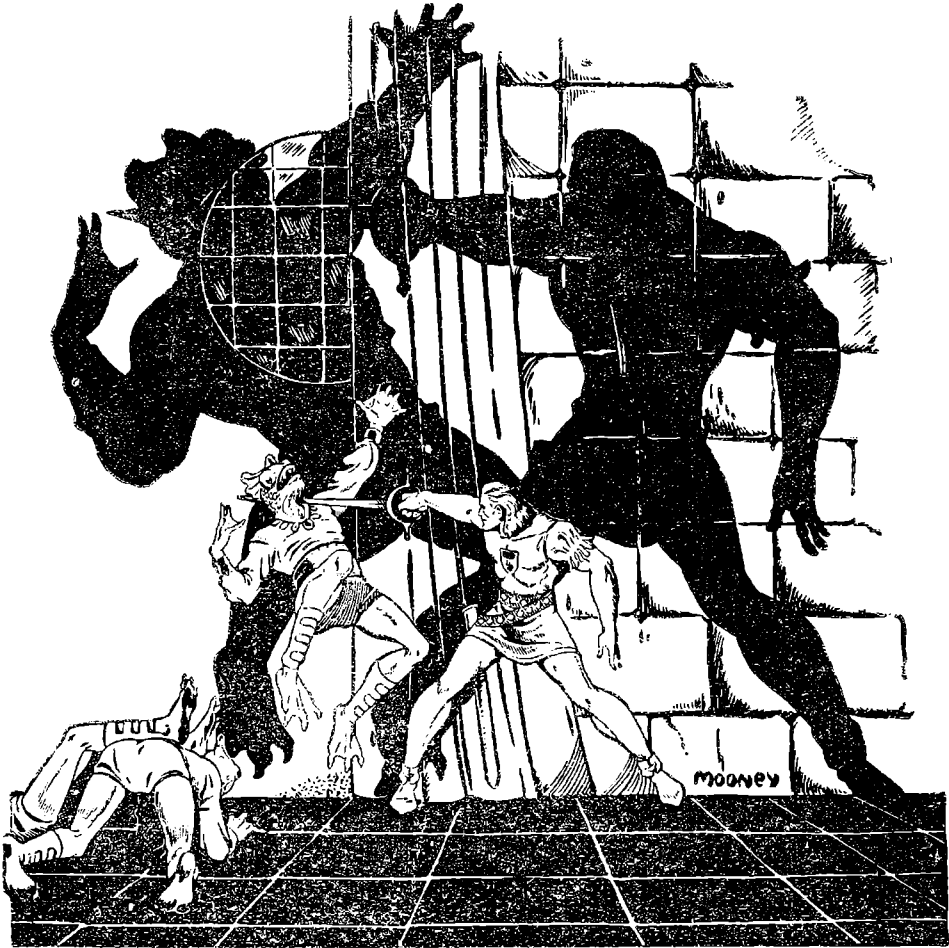
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# The Key to Cornwall

by David H. Keller

(Author of "The Human Termites," "The Ivy War," etc.)



Possession of a golden key meant possession of Cornwall. And the Toad-men wanted that land.

**T**HE overlord of Cornwall sat dreaming before the fire. He had never, even in his prime, been a large man; now age slowly had shrunk him till only his eyes held the youth that once was his. On the other side of the fire stood his son, Eric.

The men were waiting for the wise physician to announce the birth of Eric's child, who in turn would some day rule all the land. Cecil had found this country of Cornwall a land of starved, simple folk, horrific monsters and still more terrible giants. His wisdom, more

than his strength at arms, had wiped out evil till Cornwall was a pleasant place to live in. In time his only son, Eric the Golden, had married Black Breda, Princess of Wales. It was an odd marriage, the man a flaxen haired giant and the woman a black haired little female with great love in her heart and the laughter of pixies in her soul.

The old man stroked the golden key which hung pendant to a thick silken cord round his neck. He looked at his son.

"I am not easy about this matter of Breda and her child," he said. "Long years ago I came to this land from France and in various ways won victory over the Toad Men and became Overlord of the land. My friend, in that struggle of right over might and light over darkness, gave me this key. On it are graven words of a race so long dead that none can read it, but the meaning of those words is simply this,

'They who hold this golden key,  
Shall ever lords of Cornwall be.'

"Thus far the prophecy on the key has been correct. In one way or another I have held the land for you and for those who come after you. We have made peace with those around us, have held our borders against those who lived by the sword. Our nobles rule wisely and our common folk are content.

"But yesterday I had a dream. Mayhap it was only a foreboding of evil caused by overanxiety concerning your lady and her travail, but it seemed to me that a few of the Toad Men still lived to do me and mine harm. I thought they were all dead, but it may be that evil never completely dies. You have heard me speak of this key before, but keep in mind the ancient words. Tell your

son about them and have him tell his son. Long as we hold the key we hold Cornwall, but once it is taken Cornwall sinks back to the barbarism in which I found it."

Cecil would have said more, but was interrupted by the old physician. He walked before the fire and stood there rubbing his withered hands, though it was springtime and the air was warm. At last he turned to Eric, and as though answering a question, said:

"Your Lady will live, Prince Eric, but she will bear you no more children."

The golden haired giant sprang toward him, shook him rudely by shoulders and cried,

"What of the child? Is it a boy? Will he live?"

Lord Cecil leaned forward, hands gripping arms of his ivory chair. The physician laughed.

"'Tis a boy and he will live, though when you see him you will think it had been better had he died. Through him we are revenged for those of the Toad Men who died untimely that night Cecil, the pauper poet, slew us in his pride."

The Overlord of Cornwall stood up, whispering.

"Age made me lose my cunning caution. I should have known." Turning sharply, he cried to his son, "Hands off the man, Eric. Nothing must happen to you!"

With slow but certain step he came toward the old physician. For that ancient there was no retreat save into the blazing fire. Then they met, grappled, swayed and fell forward, the Overlord of Cornwall underneath. The physician had one arm around the body and one hand on the throat of the ruler, but Cecil appeared content to have both arms

around the other's neck. Eric tore a dagger from his belt and was bending to plunge it into the Toad Man when his wrist was caught in a grip that left him powerless. Turning he saw a stranger who simply smiled and whispered,

"Do not interfere. Your Sire is a proud man and I know that he has wisdom to use the only manner by which he can win. He would not care to be saved by either of us, if he needed saving, and I do not think he does."

Slowly Cecil brought his face against the face of his adversary; slowly he fastened to him mouth to mouth and there he held him, sucking the breath of life from his body. The man twisted above him, tried to rise, shake off his executioner, but slowly relaxed and at last, with a few, tortured jerks, died. As death came to him his body changed till at last it became that of a toad, giant in size, clad in human dress, but none the less an airless toad and very dead at that. The stranger separated the living from the dead, then knelt beside the Overlord of Cornwall.

"I should have come long before, my dear friend," he said, his voice husky with emotion. "I was busy with serious duties in Gobi and only today I knew of your danger; I came on the wings of light, and hardly in time to aid you. Not in time to save the boy. Now he is as he is and no one can make him different. But his father can hold the key and after him, mayhap the boy can be made somewhat of. I am very wise and now know that there is still one of the race of Toads left to do us harm; but I am not all wise so I do not know where that one is or in what shape evil will come to harm you and

your race. You have been badly hurt; the poison breathed from that spawn of Hell, methinks, will spell your doom. But all brave men pass sometime and you can be comforted by knowing that you passed bravely."

THUS CECIL, first Overlord of Cornwall, passed and Eric the Golden became custodian of the golden key and ruled in his father's land. Messengers carried the broken bow and the flameless torch throughout the country and by the third day many nobles came from near and far to do the dead man homage. But the simple folk sat unconsolated in their huts and wondered what now would happen to them.

It was not till after the funeral guests had departed and the stranger had returned to Gobi that Eric had time or even desire to visit his wife and son. He had asked often about them and was always assured that they were doing well. Now, with the castle empty of visitors he took a new suit of velvet and went to the river where he bathed till much of his grief and deep sorrow was washed from him. Then he dressed in his brave court suit and humming a little song walked back to the castle and to the room where his wife and child lay.

At the bed of Breda the Black-haired, he dropped to his knees. It was a high bed but he was a tall man and even with knees to floor he could overlook his wife. He took her hand in his, and knew, without asking, that Death had placed his cross on her forehead. She smiled.

"I am glad to see you, Eric, my first and last love; it sorrows me that I will not be a long time with you. It seems to me that I die from nothing in particular save the lack of desire to live. My Ladies tell me that now

I am the Queen of the Overlord and Mother of a new Prince; but I saw the boy, just for a moment, though my ladies tried to keep me from doing so and knowing how you would feel, I have no desire to live. Speed me with your lips, and burn candles for the peace of my soul."

Thus Eric the Golden lost two of the dear ones of his life. But he rose bravely from the side of his dead wife and whispered,

"I have a son and must live on for him, and his future greatness. Some day he will carry the golden key."

He told the ladies in waiting to take him to the child. Fearful, they escorted him to the nursery, where the withered husk of an old nurse sat at the foot of a cradle inlaid with gold, ebony and ivory, in which Eric had been rocked years before. The father looked down on his son. The ladies faded from the room. Only the old dame stayed rubbing her cold fingers.

"The boy has a large head," observed Eric. "He should be wise as a man."

"His head is large and shapely," muttered the nurse.

"There is a good jaw there. When he fastens on an opinion he will hold it. He has a strong neck and will hold his head high as he travels through life."

"His jaw is firm and his neck strong," answered the nurse, though she had no need to do so.

Eric whirled around, took her by the shoulder and shook her,

"What is wrong with the lad?" he demanded. "What is wrong with him?"

She started to cry. With great strong, shaking but tender hands Eric took off the baby clothes; then, white faced and silent replaced them and silently left the room. Out in the

hall the ladies stood rigid against the walls as though waiting to be struck. He paused.

"Tend to the lad carefully and see that he is fed on goat's milk. I go to bury his Mother; when that is done which needs be done I will come back and provide for my son."

**ON THE MORNING** of the third day he dressed in leather hunting clothes, took the child from the nursery and rode away without escort into the dark forest. The babe slept but began to cry by noon for want of food. Just then a woman walked from the greenwood and paused in front of Eric's horse. Eric, looking down on her saw that she was young, deep bosomed, flaxen haired and in all respects comely. He said kindly,

"Who are you? Why do you stop me? What can I do for you?"

"I am Breda, woman of Olax the Dane and mother of his child. Our war vessel, the Swan, wrecked on your rocks two suns ago and I was the only one to reach the shore. I found a hut and slept; last night in a dream I saw you coming with a babe who hungered for a mother, as I hunger for a dead child."

Wordless, Eric handed her the baby. Wordless the woman sat down on the grass, opened her kirtle and nursed the little one. Finally the baby slept. The woman cradled him in her arms and said quietly,

"The child has a lovely face."

Eric looked at the two of them without answer.

"A strong chin and powerful neck," she continued. "With proper care he will become a fine man."

"Hand me the young one," commanded the Overlord of Cornwall, "and do you seat yourself behind me on the horse. The boy is yours to

care for, and I will take the two of you to my hunting lodge where there will be servants to wait on you and men-at-arms to protect you; for this baby, if he lives, will some day be Lord over all Cornwall. You are a good woman and thus you will have a home and safety; your care of the child will be rewarded, if a woman can be paid for such kindness to such a child."

Time passed on. Eric found work to keep him busy. His father had cleaned Cornwall, but the son put a polish on the land till it was a country anyone could be proud to live in. One day a month he rode to visit his son and the rest of the time he tried to forget him which was very difficult. When the boy was three years old he called to the Castle an old forester who had a flair for training dogs.

"From now on, Russel, you are going to train a Prince instead of wolfhounds. My son has a strong jaw. He must be taught to use it. He must learn to hang to a rope with that jaw and never let go till he so desires. Teach him to roll over and over on the grass, to arch his back, reach low branches and pull himself along. Every day rub his body with oil. I will have a wise man train him in the use of words, and after that in all wisdom. He can learn to hold a pen in his mouth and write. When he is six we will start him off on a pony with special harness and saddle. Do you know about the lad?"

"I have heard talk about him, but paid little heed to it. It seemed to me that things could not be as bad as 'twas said."

"It is as bad as that or worse. But the boy has a fine brain, and talks very well for his age; so far he does not realize—he has seen no other children—he does not know."

"Some day," said the forester boldly, "he will know, and then he will not thank you for keeping him alive."

Eric turned on him.

"Who am I to kill my own son? We all of us have something wrong with us, with our mind or body. The boy is not to blame. Let the future tell the story! The lad has a strong jaw and a fine mind. These must carry him where he will go. It is for us to help him make the most of what he has. Do as I have told you, and remember that you have in your keeping the next Overlord of the land."

**F**ROM THAT TIME began a new life for Balder, for thus he was named, that naming having been the desire of Breda the Black, while she was carrying him. At times Eric pondered over the mockery of such a name, and thought it should be changed. Balder! Balder the Beautiful, the beloved, perfect God of the Northlands. What a name for what a child.

The boy learned to hold things in his mouth, death-gripped. He learned to ride the pony, guiding him with his teeth. Over and over he would roll on the ground. At seven he could write his name with a pen held in his mouth. Freda cared for him, Russel trained his body and a very wise, old man taught him wisdom. By the time he was twelve he knew all the old man could teach him, and could gallop on a war horse. Eric knew the time had come to bring him back to the Castle and begin teaching him the duties of Overlord which some day he would have to assume. What body he had grew strong, and he could do what any other fine boy of his age could have done with a similar body—just that much and nothing more. Because he had to

largely depend on his mind that part of him showed an unusual growth.

An artificer in leather made harness for him so he could sit in a saddle or be with his father in the banquet hall. There, except that he had to be fed, he seemed to be like any other young Prince, and, as those around him were accustomed to his care and through their great love for him never mentioned the fatal difference between him and other boys, he was mostly happy and gay and appeared to receive much of the joy of living which is the due of youth. Thus he came to his twenty-first birthday.

"And time for you to wed, my son," said Eric the Overlord of Cornwall. "The times are troublesome, and more and more it becomes difficult for us to keep the peace and preserve the land in its Golden Age. Marriage with a Princess of a neighboring land, Wales, Scotia or Ireland, would help, and mayhap your son would rule in peace and security. I think that it could be arranged."

Balder smiled rather sadly as he replied:

"It would be better for you to marry again, Father, and raise a son. No doubt some princess, bookish minded, would care to marry me for what I am above my neck, but what lovely lady would want me for the part below?"

"You have a strong neck, a powerful jaw and a fine mind, my son," said the Overlord, "and the time may come when such will take a man far in this troubled world. Your Grandfather was not much of a fighter. Just between the two of us I doubt all those legends of his conquering two-headed giants and scurvy dragons; but he had a clever mind. Had he lived he would have gloried in your knowledge of the books in

his library. Suppose I look around and see if a suitable marriage cannot be made for you."

This was easier said than done. In all the lands near Cornwall men were still settling disputes with the pole-ax and battle sword. All the Kings were kind and sympathetic, and when Eric looked them in the eye made no reference to the peculiar disability of Prince Balder; but for this and that and the other reason found that a marriage between him and one of their daughters could not be arranged for. Then, just when Eric decided that his undertaking was impossible, messengers came from a land far away offering the hand of a Princess in marriage, a beautiful lady who would bring a dower of great wealth. They brought presents and a picture of the waiting lady, and quietly said that she and her Father knew about Prince Balder but that nothing made any difference. Eric sent gifts in return and at the end of a year the Princess came and mid great pageantry she was wedded to Balder, Prince of Cornwall.

That afternoon The Overlord called on his son, saying:

"As I told you these are troubled times. The King of Wales has sent messengers to me. Enemies from the North have come in long ships and are harassing his shore. He asks for help, and that help I must give him at once. Since I must leave Cornwall you must rule in my place against my return, so around your neck I place this cord of twisted silk from which hangs the Golden Key. Guard it well and remember the ancient verse,

'They who hold this golden key,  
Shall ever lords of Cornwall be.'  
And, when the enemy is driven back,  
or better still, destroyed, I shall re-

turn; I am ill at ease that I have to leave you at this time when you should have nothing between you and your bride save thoughts of love-daisies."

"Go without fear, Father, and return when the time comes," said the son, "while you are gone nothing shall happen to the Key, and my bride Marylyn will help me in all things because she seems to be a most wise and a most beautiful lady."

**T**HUS Eric rode away followed by his men-at-arms, his archers and his pike-men and the castle drawbridge was raised; but Freda the nurse and Russel the Forester were worried and talked long into the night about their beloved Prince and his sudden advent into manhood and its responsibilities. But Lady Marylyn went to the bedroom of her husband and closed the door and locked it while Balder lay on the bed and wondered at her beauty—but not for long.

"And I am worried that a beautiful lady such as you are would deliberately mate with such a man as I am," he said sadly.

She laughed at him.

"I married you because I wanted to."

"But why should you want to?" he asked.

"Because of that key you wear around your neck. Many years ago a Prince of Darkness, aided by your grand-sire, destroyed the Toad-men who for centuries had ruled Cornwall. Only one escaped and he was my father. Soon after you were born, Cecil, Overlord of the land, killed my father, killed him most terribly and pitilessly. I am the last of my race. Through my legerdemain I arranged the marriage because, though your

father can fight, above his neck he is simply a goodnatured fool. The message from Wales was simply a part of my plan, as your father will find out when it is too late. My spirit men surround the castle. Late to-night after I am rested I will place a caudle in the window. Then the silken cord will be around my neck and the golden key will lie between my breasts; my men will swarm into the castle killing and over Cornwall destroying and once again we will rule in Cornwall. Too late your Father will learn of it—too late." She laughed merrily and ended, "And that is why I married you, poor fool!"

Taking him in her lovely arms she raised him from the bridal bed and rolled him over on the floor; then she took off her bridal dress and her silver shoes and Balder knew that she spake the truth because her toes were long and webbed, like those of a toad. Savagely she tore the silk cord from his neck and placed it around her head, then with a lighted candle on the chest at the foot of the bed, she lay down and rested and soon slept—for she had nothing to fear—nothing to fear from such a bridegroom.

Eric's son, Cecil's grandson, Balder, the far from Beautiful, save that of him above the neck, lay helpless on the floor. He thought of Cornwall, his land where peace had reigned for so many years, and knew that he and he alone stood between the simple, happy folk and death and disaster. Because there was nothing to say he said nothing. But he waited realizing that though he had lost the key, none of the spirit men would know that till the candle was placed in the window.

His bride, the so beautiful Marylyn, last of the Toad-folk, with the



arms and hands of a Venus and feet of a batrachian, lay resting, waiting, drowsing on the bed. At last she must have slept for one fair arm dropped off the bed and rested, hand on floor. Then Balder knew that perhaps fate had delivered her into his power. Very carefully he rolled over and once again over on his body, a trick he had learned on the meadow grass. Now his face was but a few inches from the devil-lady's wrist. He arched his neck, that strong bull-like neck and opened his mouth; then he suddenly took that wrist and fastened on it with jaws that for many years, once fastened, had never let go.

The toad woman screamed with pain.

Jerking, he pulled her off the bed.

She beat him on the face with her free hand, but he simply held her tighter, shaking her arm as a terrier would shake a rat. Her blood covered his face but he held her tight. She pulled him over the floor trying to reach the candle and with it in her free hand, the window; but though once and again twice, she almost reached it, each time, with a powerful, almost convulsive movement, he pulled her back to the floor. At last she fainted from loss of blood and pain. That was what he was waiting for. Opening his mouth he jerked upward and secured a new hold on her upper arm. She woke only to scream and faint again. Now, exerting all his strength, he reached her neck and clamped his jaws on it, just below her chin. Almost losing consciousness, he thought:

"All I have to do now is to hold fast."

Tighter and tighter he held her! Closer and closer his jaws closed on that white tower of loveliness and at last he knew that he lay fastened to his dead bride. He opened his jaws, worked his mouth down the silken cord, covered now with blood, and finally came to the golden key. He closed on that with his mouth and, satisfied with the knowledge that his land was safe, he fell asleep.

**T**HE next morning, urged to do so by Breda the nurse, Russel the forester with a few men-at-arms broke open the door. There on the floor lay a giant toad, its body already puffed with putrefaction, one arm torn and broken and the neck horribly mangled. Beside the dead toad lay Balder, Prince of Cornwall, with the golden key in his mouth, his face and body red with dried blood. They woke him.

"Cornwall is safe," he said with a smile, and went to sleep again.

Breda fastened the key around his neck with her apron string and Russel picked him up and carried him to his room. There they washed him and nursed him and in due time he was able to tell them the story of that night battle. And later on Breda told the story to Eric, Overlord of Cornwall, who had come back in haste, suspecting treachery when he found that Wales was at peace.

Eric listened patiently till the end of the tale.

"My son did very well," he said gladly. "Considering that he had neither arms or legs to fight with, he did very well."

"He has a strong jaw," said Breda the nurse.

