

The Black Knight with the White Horse and the Red Balloon

I had been to this land a few times in the course of my business. There was, occasionally, a need to promote trade when it seemed it might begin to decline and then, as a matter of course, I would come here for a brief visit. It's not that I dislike the place that my visits are kept short. No, it's a matter of necessity. Time is money and I do need to keep moving on to the next call. Actually, I do like this country; it's the sort of place where one could almost retire in order to relax. Like anywhere else it has its drawbacks. For one thing you cannot get a beer. You can't get any other alcoholic drink, either, as the law forbids them. This law, it should be noted, is Royal decree because this country is a Kingdom, ruled by an absolute monarchy. During this period of time things are pretty settled because the King is kindly and rules with a cool, intelligent head. He has, of course, some advisers to whom he listens before making judgements but, by and large, he is his own man and things run much his way. The Queen is also much loved. She is often seen about doing good works and chatting with people in the street to find out their views on how things are going. Generally speaking, with regard to both this Nation and myself, things are going pretty well, thank you very much.

I had arrived here shortly after lunchtime so I felt I could justify 'putting my feet up', as it were, for a few hours and starting out fresh tomorrow. With this firmly in my mind, I set out towards 'Deroo's' Restaurant - 'seafood our speciality', I had noted on previous visits. The opportunity to go in and sample this self-touted seafood had not arisen previously as I was wont to grab a snack at a roadside stall. Quite partial, I am, to a plate of fried noodles with the finely shredded beef and fiery condiments that they often serve up hereabouts. Frankly, I was intrigued. A seafood speciality restaurant was something that one has come to expect near the coast. Here we are approaching seven hundred miles, to the best of my knowledge, from the sea. There's the picture: I am walking, at a sedate pace, towards this restaurant - firmly convinced that I'm going to be served something pretty rancid, my sneer must have been matching my western clothes when someone tugged at my sleeve and jerked me viciously out of my thoughts.

"Well blow me down if tidd'n you!"

He must have considered me half-drunk as I regarded him for a few moments focussing my thoughts.

"'Tis I - Billy, you ole sod, you!"

Things clicked into place. He was a good six inches taller and wider than I am with a big smile and open features. I suppose the ladies would regard him as handsome. He was

certainly big but, then, he was a blacksmith by trade.

"Yes, Billy, my dear chap. I recognised you, of course, but I really did not expect to see you at this time - surely you are busy this afternoon at the forge?"

"Bugger I, you still talk proper posh, don't'ee? But then, 'course, you wudden know it but there's a 'oliday today being wossisname's saving day."

"I am completely bemused, Billy. 'Wossisname'? Saving day? To whom and what, pray, do you refer?"

He was a nice chap but could be a bit, how can I put this nicely, circuitous? I know, I know, you're thinking to yourself that he doesn't sound indigenious to this country and you would be right. He's from the West - like me, but he was educated over a hot fire in a 'smithy down near.... near...., I have no memory for names and that's another that's gone. I shall probably think of it in the wee hours, wake up and want to write it down but be too tired and fall asleep again. Of course, by morning it'll be gone again, will it not? It was becoming clear, judging by the intense frown on his face, that Billy was none too hot on names, either.

"Did I damp down the fire afore I left?" he mused.

"Billy? Hello? Who is 'wossisname'? What is a 'saving day'?"

"Ah, well, 'course, you wuzzent yer, wuz'ee? You wudden know about that, I don't suppose. Ah, well, see, 'tiz a long

story, that one is an' you'm always in a rush to be off."

"Come, Billy, and sample the seafood with me for a tiffin and you can explain it all to me."

"Don't know 'bout no 'tiffin' but I ain't averse to no afternoon snack if you'm paying fer it. I'll just nip back and check my fire - you go get the drinks in, mine'll be a ginger tea - sweet, mind."

I gave him a thumbs up sign and headed back towards the restaurant with every prospect, this time, of getting there. How did I know Billy? Fair question. Perhaps I forgot to mention that I deal in metal - bar, sheet and ingot, so Billy is one of my major customers. Competition is fierce in this line, especially up here, so I like to keep him happy and as he is a pleasant enough chap keeping him happy is no big chore.

Billy came in and sat down. I had already ordered the fruit juice and tea then waited while he took a long drink at his. He put the glass down gently and sat back in his chair. They, the chairs, were made of a type of thin cane that grows around here and are, apart from being cool by virtue of their open weave structure, delightfully comfortable. I had sometimes thought that I might like to take some home with me but, then, you know what 'Customs and Excise' can be like on importing biological goods! Billy made up a worm drive for me once to go in a gearbox back home - something a customer

wanted but couldn't get made locally and I was sure Billy could do it. He could and did. Customs saw the word 'worm' on the label and absolutely would not let it through. I tried to explain that it was a piece of machinery but they were resolute until I had unpacked it and shown them. What a palaver to go through on a Friday afternoon. It took me five hours to go over the border that day - it normally only takes two, by the time I had repacked it and got it back on the cart. Naturally, Customs don't bother to help reloading, do they! Especially when they see one of those new four wheel wagons with the big covers on coming up the road towards the border. Almost hear the cash registers chiming over the crunch of wheels on the road. I was mentally weighing up the possibilities of getting a set of chairs home in one piece without a lot of hassle from the customs people when Billy spoke.

"Princess Andromeda."

"Who?" I was completely lost.

"'Wossisname' is Princess Andromeda. 'Course you wudden want to go calling 'er that to 'er face even though 'tiz 'er own and given name. 'Annie' 'er loikes, o' course."

"Ah," I said, agreeing with him even though I had not the faintest idea of what he was talking about. Then it struck me. 'Saving Day' - 'wossisname'. Yes. Now I had it. My mind was, obviously, still half on the chairs, I'm a bit

sharper on the up-take than that as a rule.

(Just as an aid to you and because I am familiar with the speech patterns of Billy - which many of you will not be, I shall note Billy's narrative from now on as if he spoke normally, i.e., I shall translate it for you!)

"You weren't here then. Not when she was saved. Well, actually, she wasn't really saved, *per se*. You couldn't say that she was at death's door or anything like that. No, quite the contrary, she was in perfect health as far as we know - she looked fine, anyway. At least, she looked fine to me but, then, she was...is...a remarkably fine looking young lady, tall and....er...."

"Junoesque?" I guessed by watching his hands.

"..well, she's pretty shapely in all the right places."

I was now fervently hoping the waiter would arrive so we could order and give me a chance to sort out what this was all about. She was, it seemed, saved but not saved and hence the national holiday. National? Billy hadn't said it was national, I just assumed....

"I suspect it would be better if I started at the beginning where these things are best started so it would be best if you started to get some more drinks in and the dinner ordered to avoid being disturbed. How's that?"

"Agreed." I scented a fine story here and I was bound for a bit of relaxation anyway. I called the waiter and we

ordered our seafood dinner, a three-course affair, along with the local tea. A quick word on the tea. It is very sweet and is made with condensed milk; they mix it and bring it to a drinkable temperature by pouring it from one glass to another at arm's length - without, ever, spilling it. It is a remarkable thing to watch. One day I will tell you about the tea in the south, place called Sish Wang, where they stand two metres from the table and the tea comes out as a jet from a spout straight into your cup (more like a bowl, actually), it is boiling hot and they never, ever, miss. Remarkable, the things you see when you travel about as I have had to do over the years.

"Keep the tea coming, Waiter," said Billy enthusiastically. I hoped, in that case, that the story wouldn't be too long - not that the tea is expensive, mind, I was thinking of my capacity to withstand a visit to the toilet.

Some years ago, the story began, the King had a brilliant idea. The country had a couple of grave problems that were spoiling its, otherwise, almost idyllic existence. These problems, he was sure, were not insurmountable but would require someone with extraordinarily special talents and a great mind to resolve. In other words, the sort of person who, if they had humility and gentility also, would be precisely the sort of person who would be ideally suited to

rule the country after his demise. He recognised that King's, because they are prayed for by so many people have, statistically, shorter lives than anyone else, need to sort out the matter of an heir to the throne early on in life. This being a patriarchal society, and he and his wife only having a daughter, meant that he had urgent need to get his little girl wed to the right person fairly soon; she was already in her mid-teens and showing every sign of being the sort of girl every mother would want her son not to marry. The King, with the agreement of the Queen, linked the two matters and made an announcement to the effect that, given other suitable factors, anyone who could solve the Kingdom's problems would be offered the hand of Princess Andromeda in marriage. Annie hated the posters with this announcement on. They made her feel like something for offer on a cart sale. And 'Andromeda', indeed! How formal. But, then, Bapa was like that (she was fond of calling her father 'Bapa') and so was Mama. So stiff, but so kind to her. Until now. She thought, pessimistically, that this meant that she would never be married and would die a virgin - well, a spinster, anyway. She smiled gently to herself and curled up to indulge in the kind of thoughts that teenagers of both sexes enjoy in quiet moments alone.

She was nearly right. Billy had wanted to apply but was advised not to do so. He was, the King's adviser had said,

too valuable to be allowed into dangerous activities however much he admired, and he did, the Princess. The nation paid a lot for his skills and felt disinclined to try and obtain another 'smith who they might not get along with as well as they did with him. Until Billy had arrived here there was no metal in common use. They had no ores and all metallic implements used had been brought in by traders at, usually, high prices. Billy's arrival had been the dawn of a new era. The King had sent out advertisements to other countries - particularly to the west, asking for blacksmiths to become expatriate contract workers here. Billy had answered the call and been happily accepted. That was many years ago. He did not look his age and was still fit as a fiddle but unmarried. Some people wondered why. The girls here were noted for their extreme beauty and shapeliness and many would yearn after his slimly muscular body even though, with the tan included, it was still a shade paler than their honey brown curves. No, the adviser had said firmly and with an air of finality, you are not the man for this job, we sorely need you safe and well here. Billy sometimes pondered what the Princess felt about that as he knew her well and fancied she had an eye for him. Ah, well. So we dream, he had thought to himself.

The years rolled by. Many had come in answer to the call. Some had made the attempt to solve the problems as set out to them by the King. None returned. By now Andromeda -

Annie, was in her mid-twenties and was radiantly beautiful and definitely 'Junoesque'. She was also starting to look a little downcast - wistful, some said, not unkindly. There were knots of concern for her among the people when they gathered for the markets. There were the occasional remarks that, perhaps, the King had made a decision in haste, that, maybe, there were other ways to solve the problems without penalising the lovely Princess Annie. There were the odd flickers of sadness on the faces of the King and Queen. There were said to be hushed, but heated, discussions in the Royal chambers. The King would not retract. He was not too proud to change his mind but he felt that the problems of the Realm came before the desires of the individual. He knew nobody would blame him for giving up. He was convinced there was someone out there who could help. Would help. He was certain.

Billy was banging nails into the front nearside hoof of a palomino when, for some unaccountable reason, he felt compelled to look up. The two nails he had been gripping between his lips fell to the ground unheeded. He let go the hoof and the palomino snorted and stamped it impatiently. Coming up the street, astride an enormous white horse, was the finest suit of black armour that Billy had ever seen. He was deeply impressed by the craftsmanship and drank in the details of it like a man dying of thirst as it rode past him. It was

an unfamiliar pattern and had a sheen that he did not recognise. Definitely from a long, long way away Billy knew with certainty. So engrossed was he with the armour that he did not notice the balloon until the last moment as the horse and armour swung left around the castle walls towards the main gate, disappearing from Billy's mesmerised gaze. Billy shook his head in wonderment. A foreign knight from far away lands dressed all in black armour riding a huge white horse, with the thickest feathers you could imagine, carrying a red balloon. Why a red balloon? Billy knew precisely why the knight was here and wondered if he would disappear like the rest. He sighed and went back to the palomino's hoof.

The Black Knight pulled up at the main gate to the castle. The guard reported that his voice had been quiet but compelling, no hint of arrogance but with an air of one who is used to command. He walked the great white horse over to the stables where a lad took him to be curried and catered for and another lad led the Knight to a side door. The Knight had asked why the side door and not the main entrance and the lad explained that the main entrance had many stone steps which some people with metal shoes had slipped upon and, besides, the Knight's armour looked very heavy for climbing unnecessarily. Then, much to the surprise of the lad, the Knight thanked him for his consideration in what sounded like a most sincere fashion. At the side door a footman took over,

greeted the Knight and enquired how he should be presented to their Majesties.

"As I am," said the Knight "Present me as 'The Black Knight'."

"From whither shall I say that you come?"

"The road into the city."

"This is very enigmatic, Sire, but the King will want to know more - could you be more forthcoming with your personal details?"

"The King will understand, for I have heard that he is wise, that I am here to do a job of work and that the risk is, it seems, all mine for the present. It is for me to know the details of the task rather than for others to know of me. I will state the same to the King."

"Sire. It shall be as you wish."

And so the Black Knight was led into the presence of the King and Queen. He knelt and offered the pommel of his sword to their Majesties who bade him rise.

"Although it may seem apparent, would you state the reason for your visit to us, Sir Knight?"

"I shall indeed, Your Highness. You issued an invitation for anyone with courage, determination, intelligence and wit to come here and solve the nation's problems. The remuneration for this task is the hand of your daughter, the Princess Andromeda, in marriage. No doubt this would, in

turn, lead to land and responsibility for the Kingdom? If so, then I am the man you have sought. I have travelled far since hearing the news which, I gather, has taken time to reach me. Where I have travelled from and other details regarding myself are irrelevant to the issue. What is relevant is the future course of action and that is now in your hands, my Liege."

"Should you succeed in the tasks which we will outline to you, then we will indeed, offer you the hand of our only child. With that in mind, could we, at least, see your face since all else that you say is true?"

"I wonder why my physical appearance should be of any importance in this matter. However, as you ask it of me, I see no reason to demur."

With a sweep of his hand, the helm's visor was lifted and, no sooner had the King's eyes focussed, than it was immediately dropped. The King's eyes were twinkling in merriment.

"I prithee do it again, Sir Knight, for I missed the opportunity," asked the Queen.

The King chuckled, "It is not necessary, my Dearest, trust me. This man is as wise as he says he is and I earnestly hope that he is the successful candidate for whom we have prayed so long. Come, Black Knight, with me into the ante room where we can discuss the future in peace."

Billy had said that the Princess was on tenterhooks to

see the Knight properly. She knew he was big and must, by the quality of his armour, be rich and successful. But how old was he? What did he look like? She could find nobody to tell her these things. The only person with an inkling was her Dad and he just smiled at her and said that she might, one day, find out. What, he pointed out, was the object of her wondering about these things if he never comes back - he's just another ship in the night, as it were. Billy thought that it was more like another knight slipping by and was amused by his own pun. He, of course was more entranced by the armour and the horse both of which he had ample opportunity to observe over the next week. He was put to work constructing some items for the Knight, paid for by the castle so Billy wondered how rich he really was. Mind, he could be, he supposed, wealthy in his own right but reasoned that if the King wanted this job doing then the King should pay for the tools. Apart from 'smithing Billy had pointed the Knight in the right direction to obtain other stores and a mule to carry it all. He studied, as closely as he dare without appearing rude, the armour and was mightily impressed with the detail work. Such fine filigree work. How had it been incorporated into the suit? It appeared to be hammered out of one sheet but the embellishments must have been added - yet he could see no join. One evening the Black Knight told Billy to take a good look at whatever he wanted to see. He seemed amused that

the 'smith had been trying to examine the armour without looking at it.

"Don't be shy lad" he had told him in a kindly fashion "I know you're fascinated and you're a fine craftsman yourself."

Billy was a bit taken aback by the voice coming through the visor. He hadn't thought that the Knight had noticed him looking and confessed to feeling as if he had blushed with guilt. But of course he was grateful and took every opportunity to examine as closely as he could. To no avail. He still could not see how it was made. He was a bit crushed, professionally, to the point of asking the Knight where it was made and by whom. A great, great man made it many years ago in a land far, far away. It is a cold, bleak place you would not wish to see twice in a lifetime, the Knight informed Billy, unlike the land of my birth. Billy had to ask where that was and received the same reply as everyone else had to the same question; it was a long, long way away.

Very early the next morning the Knight picked up the things Billy had made and the items he had purchased which were stored in Billy's shed, put them on the mule and rode out of town. He looked indestructible mounted on that huge white horse and with the red balloon fluttering gaily on the end of its string.

Billy looked deeply into his nearly empty glass. I suspected that he was preparing to drop some hint about the

tide being out.

"Funny, that." he observed.

I considered that he meant how empty the glass had become and was about to call the waiter.

"Why did it always stay up?"

The tea? The glass?

"If the gas is in the balloon under pressure - which it has to be because the walls of the balloon will press in on it, then the gas inside the balloon is denser than the gas outside the balloon. Ergo, the balloon is heavier than the surrounding air."

"You are trying to tell me something, Billy, and I'm not sure what it is."

"A ship floats because it displaces its own mass of water before the top of it is under the surface of that water. For a balloon to float it must displace a mass of air heavier than that represented by its own volume. If the volume of air displaced by the balloon weighs more than the weight of the balloon plus the gas in it then the balloon will 'float', otherwise it will hang down on the end of its string."

"OK, Billy, I'm with you on this. But what's the point you're making?" I thought I sounded more confident in my understanding of the situation than I really was. Part of the art of marketing, you know.

Billy's eyes never left the glass and his mind didn't

seem to leave the country it was in - it certainly didn't seem to be here with us. "His balloon always floated."

A thought struck me "The Black Knight was some sort of wizard?"

Billy looked at me in total disbelief.

"It was only a suggestion, Old Chap."

He shook his head and swirled the last drop of tea. "No. We never, ever, saw him top up the balloon and yet all balloons will seep gas out after a time. I don't know of any membrane that is completely non-porous, that is not to say that there isn't a non-porous membrane - I just don't know of one. And that, I suspect, is the crux of the matter."

"That you don't know of a non-porous membrane?" I admit it. I was absolutely nonplussed.

Billy sighed, his shoulders went down and he sighed again. He had the air of one who was dealing with a particularly dense child.

"You're not seeing the whole picture. He's got a horse that has been bred to be enormous. We've never seen such a fine animal here. He's got armour that is exquisitely made and looks like it will stop anything I could throw at him. He's got a balloon which does two things; it floats because it is lighter than air even 'though the gas in it is, necessarily, compressed; it doesn't leak - ever, as far as we can tell. Tell me what you think of all that. You're the one

who's had all the expensive education. I'm just a simple 'smith with country boy logic and a bit of physics picked up from my mate who's a teacher of science up at the castle."

"Well," I was groping for some common factor. People like Billy tend not to ask you questions and I'd got out of the habit of thinking too deeply. Now, now, there's no call to be rude. Another comment like that and I'll just up and go and you won't hear the end of it. "If he's got all this wonderful gear that we've never heard of then he must come from some civilisation far away that's a bit in advance of us." I was flannelling and Billy knew it.

"Where?"

"The whole of the world has not yet been explored. Who is to say what is out there beyond the western lands?"

"Sea."

"Ah, but what then?"

"The eastern lands."

"But beyond the western lands would be the far western lands - across the sea."

"The world is a globe, a sphere, a ball. If you go east and cross the sea you come to our western country and vice versa. If you go north you freeze to death. South and you scorch until, eventually, you freeze; keep going and you're back on the sea between the east and west countries. Where is there left?"

"There is an area between the scorching and the freezing to the south where nobody has explored."

"Nobody has explored it because it's full of aboriginals who glory in massacring anyone who sets foot there. There is no hidden civilisation, no glorious technical empire there, and no lost world. This is all out of story books; the fact is that it is mostly tropical jungle going on to bush, grassland, pine forests, tundra and then small mountains and pack ice. Well-armed parties have got through the natives - strange, pale people with white hair, and lived to tell us about it. Any more ideas?"

I felt a bit wounded. He was, of course, correct. Once you dispense with myth and legend there wasn't much left that couldn't be explained. Churlishly, perhaps, I responded with "That only leaves some other world, then, doesn't it?"

"Ah. We're there at last. My theory exactly." He looked very pleased with himself. My joke at his expense had backfired on me. Sarcasm turned into irony at a stroke! I called the waiter to refresh our tea.

"That raises more questions than it answers."

"Such is life. Such is any worthwhile question and any good answer. For instance - why are leaves green?"

"What?" I was perplexed "Because they contain chlorophyll, of course."

"Of course, but why is it green?"

"What is your point? Obviously green is the best colour for the job. Certainly it is the most restful on the eyes." I tried to inject a touch of levity. Failed.

"Is it restful on the eyes thus leaves are green or is it restful on the eyes because leaves are green. Chicken and egg, so to speak. No. The point is that sunlight is mostly yellow light therefore leaves reflect away most of the light they get from the sun. This is inefficient when you see, in nature, the effort leaves go to to get light. Nobody knows why leaves are green. Everyone just accepts it as a fact. Similarly, everyone just accepts as fact that there is no way of getting to another planet and, therefore, there is no way for anyone from another planet to get to us. Inverse logic. Along the lines of: All bald men have false teeth therefore everyone with false teeth is a bald man. If you would care to calculate how many chances there are for life to form in our galaxy you would notice that there are, potentially, millions of planets which could have life on them - all at our level of development? I think not. Some more primitive, some very much more primitive and, conversely...." He trailed off and looked at me expectantly.

"Why? Why would anyone from another planet want to come here? Here, for heaven's sake! What have we got that's so desirable?"

"Peace, maybe? Freedom? Who knows what the social

conditions are like on other worlds? You've seen the smoke I get off the fires in the 'smithy sometimes. Imagine if a world was smelting and working vast quantities of metal it might be full of smoke. Perhaps he just wanted clean air."

"I shall have to ponder this. It's all a bit radical for me. Perhaps you'd best finish the story because I still don't see this Annie getting saved." I rather thought he had a somewhat fervid imagination and was wondering how this reflected on the rest of the story. Still, I was anxious that he should tell the rest of it and preferably without getting me involved in too much cerebration. I was here, after all, for a spot of rest this evening.

"We left the Black Knight riding off to the north early one morning with a mule in tow. The mule laden, we remember, with a load of equipment. We know he stopped one night at a farm some sixty kilometres from here because we got a rather excited report from the farmer's boy when he came into town about a week later. He was a shade crestfallen when he discovered that we all knew about this Knight and his horse. Everyone asked him what the Knight looked like. Each time he said that the Knight was big and black. Each time he was asked he had to admit he hadn't actually seen the Knight's face. And so the boy became even more dejected. Billy had asked him about the horse and in which direction had they ridden off. The boy cheered up a bit now because here were

questions he could answer that nobody else knew. The horse wasn't sweating. No. The Knight's armour gleamed like new when he arrived and when he left. No. There was no smell of rust and yet it had showered a little that day. That fascinated Billy and so the boy began to get happy. Yes. They had gone north. Into the big grasslands and towards that thin blue line that was the northern ranges. Great, high peaks. Jagged and covered all year around at their summits with snow and ice. So the story goes. No one has ever been up close to them, at least in living memory. Between the mountains and us there are two wonders. There is a two kilometre long bridge spanning a kilometre wide abyss which stretches around the world. Geologically improbable though it is the gap exists. The bridge is a wonder for two reasons. Firstly it is structurally unsound and should not be there - not that anyone has ever crossed it, at least not in living memory; someone must have crossed it at one time or it would not have been built. The second reason is the same as the second wonder. Trolls. The abyss is populated by Trolls. It is widely known as accepted wisdom that Trolls eat anything. People are definitely on the menu for them. Trolls are very, very, strong, impossible to kill and incredibly stupid. It is only for that last fact that we are not overrun with them. They are too stupid to realise the rich harvest in people that awaits them to the south and prefer to live out their

enormously long lives in the abyss. Home sweet home. Now, who would want to go near the bridge let alone cross it? Who built the bridge? Crazy men or Trolls. Face it. Given the accepted wisdom it had to be crazy men. Does this mean that Trolls don't eat crazy men? Unlikely. Trolls, hear this again, eat anything and everything. Everyone knows that. For a fact. Who told us what happened at the bridge? A Troll. What was the problem that the King set the Black Knight? Find a way of safely crossing the bridge into the Northern ranges so that the Kingdom will be extended and we can, maybe, trade with whoever lives the other side - if anyone does. How did the Knight solve the problem? He asked the first Troll he met why people from the south should not cross the bridge in safety. The Troll told him that people could cross all they liked for all she cared. They are frightened, she was told, of being eaten. Oh? And by whom? She wanted to know. By Trolls. Troll laughter can be thunderous. Watching a four metre high Troll covered in very, very thick fur weighing in the region of two hundred and fifty kilos rolling on the floor in helpless mirth can be extremely disturbing. They don't get much to laugh at up there so this was a real treat for her and she made the most of it. They came to an agreement. The Trolls would 'guard' the bridge to ensure the safety of travellers and the travellers would pay either one cow, two sheep or three goats as a toll to cross. The Trolls would

prefer the cattle but she recognised the improbability of everyone having access to a herd. She was a little concerned at the dishonesty involved. Guard the bridge from what or whom? Ensure the safety of the travellers from what or whom? Trolls, she was informed. Another lengthy and thunderous bout of laughing. She thought this was wonderful. And no, they don't eat humans or pigs - both are filthy beasts. No, they do not go south - it's too warm unless they shave off all their fur and that would be indecent, don't you think? Again, no, she didn't think she had a threatening or menacing appearance; in fact, she had been told more than once how attractive she was and that her eight protruding canine teeth were particularly even, sharp and yellow. Why, anyone could see for themselves what a vivacious little charmer she could be with almost no effort at all. Who built the bridge? Ah, the stuff of legend, she told him. If the Trolls couldn't remember then it must have happened a very long time ago. Unless she was hiding something. Something not for 'foreign' ears."

Billy stood and stretched.

"Just off to the 'pit' to make room for another tea" he said, glancing at the empty glass. I acquiesced and called the waiter over. By the time Billy returned to the table the fresh tea was ready for him. I asked him if that was the end of the matter.

"Oh, no. That was only the first part. Certainly the Northern Ranges are now open for us to visit - not something generally spread about to other countries at present because things seem to be happening up there. Things which could be extremely beneficial to this country." He leaned back and tapped the side of his nose with his finger and, with a wink, said "But that's, maybe, a story for next time you come to visit us." He smiled broadly. I'm not too sure whether he liked the company of someone from back home or whether he liked my capacity to provide him with tea. Still, it did the marketing effort no harm and I could always raise the commission a touch to cover the costs.

"If that's not it then what is?"

"You must have heard of the dragon that was terrorising the east?"

"I have. But you said 'was'. I take it that the dragon is no more?"

"We don't know that for sure, really. But we do know that the second part of the job was to get rid of the dragon. The King suspected that it would move west before too long and we can do without that monster preying on us."

"I didn't think that dragons ate people."

"They don't, but they do eat cattle and, sometimes, sheep. They will also take deer and large ruminants other than cattle."

My knowledge of geography, in this respect, was a bit hazy. I did no business in the east. Apart from being way too far to go it was populated by seafarers who were inordinately partial to drink and rowdyism. Now, I am of a somewhat delicate disposition and none too well built, as it were and I am told, or, rumour has it, rather, that these sailors are partial to, well, how can we put this tastefully, they are none too bothered whether their date is a woman or...er...not. Better safe than sorry; I stay away from these eastern towns and let the braver or more robust of my competition visit. Or even, perhaps, those who are not averse to such companionship. There are people like that, you know, and I let them get on with their lives as long as they don't try it on me because I should just scream out loud, I know I should and there's an end to it. Billy continued "You clearly didn't realise that the eastern countries, where the dragon chooses to live, used to be a thriving and prosperous agricultural area - proud of its roots steeped in dairy farming of the highest quality. They would export cream, cheeses, butter and dried milk of superb quality all over the known world. And then the dragon took up residence somewhere in the territory. Where it came from, nobody knows. It has been there for so long that history does not record its arrival. Maybe it used to live here, or in the West, who knows. But over those uncounted years the herds of cattle

gradually dwindled to almost nothing due to the depredations of the dragon and the people moved to sea for their living. Now they are, as you realise, of course, merchantmen sailors and fishermen."

It must have been all that tea clouding my judgement. I really could not see what this had to do with the King here. I told him so.

"Of course the King is worried. As I said. The reports we are getting are that the eastern nations have almost no cattle left. Where will the dragon go when there are none left? Maybe here, for all we know. The King is concerned that the cattle here will start to disappear and, while we don't have the same reputation for dairy farming as the old eastern countries did, we still have a pretty robust trade in some dairy products and meat, of course. The King recognises that there may be another dragon somewhere else that could take this one's place but that's a different risk - let us, he said, get rid of the devil we know. And that was the Black Knight's other task."

"Before you go on. What happened to the other candidates for this suicide mission?"

"It is said that they either started with the dragon and lost or attempted to manipulate the Trolls by subjugating them with the sword. There are, at any rate, a pile of whitened bones at the bottom of the abyss, according to those who have

travelled across the bridge. The Trolls say nothing about it, they just smile. What's a dead enemy to a Troll? The other alternative is that they decided to go home without attempting anything. The wise ones, that is."

"Why did you volunteer?"

"You haven't seen Annie."

"OK, then. So, what about the great worm?"

"What?"

"Sorry. Old form of address for a dragon."

"Worm? They don't look anything like a worm from what I've heard."

"Well serpents used to be called worms at one time and so the dragon was regarded as a flying serpent, or worm. Call it what you will and I'll get the teas in."

Billy was starting to look a bit ruffled about the worm business but the sound of the word 'tea' seemed to mollify him and I could see his feathers smoothing down - figuratively speaking.

Nothing more was heard of the Black Knight for some time. He had sent a messenger back from one of the outlying farms with a note for the King. It had merely said 'Cross the bridge over the abyss but leave cattle for the Trolls toll. One head for each group of up to five, two head for a group of up to ten, and so on. They would appreciate the odd gratis sheep or goat; a minstrel to sing them a ballad or two would

ease the way considerably if you want an escort to the other side. I am going on to the east and will see you when the task is complete." It was signed 'BK, WH & RB'. There was a little concern at the enigmatic mention of an escort. Why would an escort, they thought, be necessary? Clearly there was something to the North which held danger for the inexperienced and unprepared traveller. Better take an extra cow, or two, to be on the safe side. A few brave souls went up to the bridge in a preliminary exploration party to test out the treaty that had been forged by the Black Knight and found the Tolls full of good humour and licking their lips in anticipation of a nice fat cow for lunch. The explorers were a bit agitated at first, they weren't sure if the lip-smacking was for them and then, when they realised they would actually be safe, they suspected that the cow would be ripped apart and eaten raw. This was a facet of Trolldom that they really did not relish witnessing. They were stunned when one of the Trolls (they were greeted by three, which is, in Troll custom, a crowd) sauntered over to one of the cows and whispered into its ear while gently stroking its poll. Then they noticed a pool of blood spreading over the ground under the cow and took a step back. The cow continued to chew the cud contentedly until, eventually, it sighed and knelt down as if very tired. At some point it died peacefully and was immediately stripped of skin, gutted and a pole shoved through it lengthways. A

huge fire was assembled and the explorers were invited to the barbecue which was, they admitted, delicious and, apart from the actual butchering, pretty damned civilised. They were stunned at this unTroll-like behaviour. Where, they wondered, had these legends of hairy devils come from? The Trolls didn't care. They were lying bloated on the floor in a state of complete bliss. More and more Trolls arrived and another cow was slaughtered and put on the fire. The people from the city were amazed. Never in their wildest dreams did they think they would ever be happily lying on the floor amid a throng of, maybe, a hundred or more Trolls with beef grease all over their faces and belching fit to bust along with the best of them! The Trolls were delighted with the extra cattle that had been brought and chattered excitedly for hours about the possibility of building a herd until one of them asked if the grass here was adequate. They were told that enquiries would be made on their behalf and others would return with advice. A happy Troll is a generous Troll and two agreed to go with the party to explore the Northern ranges and then there was a chance comment from one of the Trolls about that being the second time recently that a Troll had left the abyss with a human. When asked about it they closed up and would not elaborate. They smiled their little smile, as Trolls do, and left you to wonder.

Nearly a year after the note had appeared the Black

Knight turned up. There was no mule and no fanfare or roll of drums. Just he and the great white horse and, would you believe it? The red balloon floating gaily on its string tied to the pommel. There had been no message from the surrounding countryside, no warning from the palace guard up on the battlements, he rode quietly in, as he had before. He raised his hand gently to Billy as he rode past and Billy was able to see that the beautiful armour was scratched and dented here and there and that there were distinct burn marks on the right leg and arm. He was unable to see the left leg because it was the other side of the horse. Billy felt a sadness welling up inside. The perfect armour no longer pristine. That had to have been some battle but the armour.... oh, the armour. That impregnable, magnificent armour. Damaged. He failed to notice the box tied to the saddle behind the Knight, such was his grief; others told him that about the scarred war-horse. Others had told him that the horse now limped and whose once proud head was not held quite so high. He watched the armour disappear around the corner to main gate of the castle and felt the motivation to do his work drain out of him. The armour had toppled off its pedestal.

"You're back - you've come back" shouted the sentry.

"I have, Lad, I have - and thankful for it." replied the Black Knight quietly. "I should wish to see His Royal Highness with despatch, if you don't mind, my Boy."

"Of course, of course, of course" jabbered the sentry excitedly and waving frantically to a boy in the courtyard. "Take this great Knight to the King's door and then lead his charger to the stables where he is to be spoilt completely - I, Sergeant Azby of the King's Personal Guard, command it to be so."

The boy was open mouthed with wonder, puffed up with pride (hoping that all the other boys in the yard were looking at him with envy), anxious to please and terrified almost out of his wits at the close proximity of such mightiness.

The Lord Chancellor had heard the commotion in the yard - as the Sergeant had intended, and made his way to the King's door to meet the Knight. He greeted the Knight warmly.

"It is good to see you return, Sir Knight. You are welcome here to rest, eat and regale us with your adventures, if you would. The King will be anxious to know if you were rewarded with success." The Lord Chancellor's eyes regarded the battle-damaged armour but gave no indication of what he thought the outcome might have been. He smiled warmly at the Knight and motioned for him to follow.

The King was sitting on his throne when they entered the main hall. He was dressed informally, as was his wont, and had an air of anticipation on his face and in his posture.

"Good morning, Sir Knight. I also bid you welcome, as I am sure that the Lord Chancellor has already extended our

felicitations."

"Thank you, Your Royal Highness. Please call me BK as this would be less stressful on the tongue and I, with your permission, will address you as Sire."

The King nodded his agreement and indicated a seat for the Knight.

"Should you have been successful in your endeavours on our behalf - and I believe you were or you should not have returned, we will require some small proof that the dragon is no more or, as with the Trolls, has been dealt with diplomatically to our advantage."

"The dragon, Sire, is dead."

"Then please, take refreshment until the Queen and the Princess arrive. Then you may tell us, all together, of your adventure and proffer us, one and all, with the proof of it."

The Knight looked around to ensure that there were present only the King and the Lord Chancellor before removing his helmet. The King smiled and held out his hand and the Lord Chancellor's eyebrows went up a shade before he, too, smiled broadly.

"These beef sandwiches are very good," the Knight said "the Trolls would love them - they have never tried bread with their meat, I don't suppose, and the touch of mustard is a welcome addition that would tickle their fancy."

The Queen entered asking what the laughter was about.

The Princess Andromeda was right behind her and looking equally puzzled.

"You are not, as a general rule, given much to guffawing" said the Queen looking at His Majesty "It does not lend itself to your Regal mien." But she didn't look as if she disapproved. The Princess, on the other hand, was transfixed; she just could not take her eyes off the Black Knight.

"Tell us, BK, of your adventure now that we are all assembled."

"I will offer you first the proof." He put the box on the table and asked the Princess to open it. She leaned forward and raised the lid. Her nose wrinkled a bit and she was a bit hesitant about touching the cloth inside which she gingerly removed from the box. Inside the cloth was something fairly heavy and more than just a little aromatic - to coin a phrase, and most of the noses wrinkled up some more. She lost her grip on an edge of the cloth. It fell open and a large, hairy, pointed object with a hole in it tumbled out onto the table - narrowly missing the beef sandwiches. The Black Knight picked up a sandwich and bit into it. Everyone else looked at the object in some horror until the Princess said:

"Hello! What's this ear?"

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