
7-15-2011

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Recommended Citation

Rossman, Dag (2011) "*The Quality of Mercy*," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2011: Iss. 33, Article 8.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2011/iss33/8>

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The Quality of Mercy

The Quality of Mercy

by

Dag Rossman

Gudmund awakened from a fitful sleep to awareness that his shoulder was being gently shaken by the hand of a large hooded figure who knelt beside him. Startled and confused for a moment by his surroundings—which appeared to be a large cave—Gudmund sat bolt upright and gasped: “What? Who?”

Faragrim, the draug who had rescued him from three trolls the day before, chuckled as he stood: “I didn’t mean to frighten you, my friend, but you have slept away much of the morning . . . so you have just enough time for a bit to eat before we must be on our way if I’m to see you safely to Kverndal before the trolls emerge again from their daytime lairs. If they were to attack in larger numbers, or in a place where they could come at me from both front and back at the same time, I fear I might not be able to protect you.”

Gudmund shuddered at the thought. Kneeling by the small fire that illuminated the cave and took the edge off the chill in the air, he hastened to consume the food Faragrim had laid out for him. Although the draug no longer needed to eat, he maintained a larder of imperishable foodstuffs for the benefit of his occasional mortal visitor.

Shortly thereafter, Faragrim led Gudmund out of the cave mouth and into the maze of trails that wound among the rocky heights of the Trolls’ Teeth mountains. From time to time the companions passed by a cave opening or a deep, dark crevice in the rocks . . . and these they gave as wide a berth

as the trail permitted.

“Some are the lairs of wild animals, but others show troll sign. Either way, it’s best to take no chances,” declared Faragrim. “I’ll stay with you until we are within sight of the twin stones they call the Gate of Kverndal. You’ll be safe enough on your own from there on.”

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am for all you have done for me, Faragrim. I owe you my life! But aren’t you taking an awful risk coming so far from shelter in broad daylight?” Gudmund asked anxiously. “I’ve always heard that draugs could only go abroad at night.”

“Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh.” Faragrim’s chuckle was eerie. “Have no fear, my friend; sunlight would neither turn me to stone like a troll nor blind me as it would a dwarf. I can’t say what constraints keep other draugs in the dark but, as for me, I prefer the darkness for the same reason I wear this deep hood . . . to conceal my features from any mortal being I might chance to meet. My countenance is that of one long dead, a sight few mortals could gaze upon without fear and loathing. The lady Freyja spared me from having to enter Hel’s domain that I might protect mortals, not terrify them.”

“You needn’t hide your face from me, Faragrim. After all you have done for me, how could I possibly fear you now?”

“A generous attitude, Gudmund, and I am touched by your trust, but I think we would both be more comfortable if I remain hooded. Besides, you never know when

someone else might suddenly appear. Trust me in this, too, my friend, as you do in all else.”

They walked in silence for several minutes before Gudmund changed the subject by asking: “Tell me, if you will, the story behind that remarkable staff you used to slay the two trolls yesterday. Their leader called it a rune staff, but I didn’t see or hear you use any magic at the time.”

“And I didn’t,” declared Faragrim. “I let the trolls’ over-eagerness work to their own destruction. It is part of the art of staff-fighting to use a stronger enemy’s power against him. Thus I was able to redirect the first troll’s charge away from me and over the cliff. A few well-placed blows brought the second troll to his knees; then it became a simple matter to send him after the first one. Magic should only be used as a last resort.”

“But you could have done so, if you’d felt the need?”

“Oh, yes, Gudmund, Kraki was right when he called my staff a rune staff. I suppose I’d better tell you where it came from before you burst with curiosity.”

“Please do,” Gudmund responded eagerly.

“Well, it happened like this,” began Faragrim as he thought back over the many momentous events that had marked his existence as a draug. “Soon after my encounter with Freyja and Hel, I left my barrow mound for good because so many people lived nearby that it would have been only a matter of time before someone saw me coming or going . . . and that would have created a panic in the neighborhood. Draugs have an unfortunately well-deserved reputation for destructive behavior, and I knew that I wouldn’t be given a chance to convince my mortal neighbors that I was different from other draugs. No, sooner or later some hotheads would have decided I was simply too dangerous to be trusted, and then they would have tried to burn me up in

my mound. If it had come to that, I probably could have fought my way free and gotten away—but almost surely not without injuring some of the very people Freyja had charged me with protecting!

“So I simply stole away in the middle of the night after replacing the stones so everyone would think I was still reposing quietly within the mound. Then I set out to find a new home in a more remote area. Hence my cave in the Trolls’ Teeth mountains, which is an ideal location, for it lies right on the edge of troll country, thus making it easy for me to keep an eye on them . . . as well as for me to go down into the valleys and watch over the human farmsteads.

“From time to time as I made my rounds, I would come upon moose in the margins of the dark mountain tarns where those magnificent animals came to feed on the juicy water plants. At first they were skittish when I approached but, in time, they became used to the sight and smell of me and calmly went about their business . . . as I did mine. One large male, who apparently possessed more curiosity than his fellows, eventually went so far as to come up to the trail and greet me with a regal nod of his great head. When he did this, I paused and spoke quietly to him for a moment before going on my way. This became something of a ritual for us whenever I passed by. Having become by necessity rather a solitary creature, it eased my loneliness to be able to form a sympathetic bond with another living being. What that grand old fellow got out of it, I cannot say, but it must have brought him some degree of pleasure, too, or he wouldn’t have continued to greet me by the tarn once he had assured himself that I was no threat to him or his family.”

“How wonderful,” said Gudmund, admiringly. “I have never heard of anyone else who succeeded in befriending a ‘King of the Forest.’ Most people who aren’t hunting

moose for their meat just try to stay out of their way.”

“Which is wise of them,” responded Faragrim, “for when a moose is aroused it could easily trample a man to death. But, be that as it may, my pleasant companionship with this particular bull soon came to an abrupt and tragic end.”

“What happened?” asked Gudmund with concern.

“One morning when I approached the tarn, there were no moose to be seen. Puzzled, I drew nearer to the margin of the dark water to see if there might be some clue to their absence. Nothing was visible at first, but shortly I heard a breathy moaning sound coming from a beaten-down stand of reeds farther along the shore. Pushing my way into the reeds, I discovered the body of the old bull, broken and bleeding. He was still alive, but just barely. It was clear to me that his back had been broken and the flesh torn from one hind leg and that side of his rib cage. I was also sure that his attacker would be coming back to finish the job . . . perhaps after it let its big meal settle for awhile.”

“How horrible!” gasped Gudmund. “Who—or what—could have done such a thing?”

“Gruesome it was, for certain, but only the way of things sometimes if the killer were another animal.” Then the draug’s tone took on a hard edge. “But any human who would eat flesh from the body of his still-living prey is needlessly torturing and dishonoring the animal that is being sacrificed that he might live. Such a person hardly deserves to be called a man!”

“Ugh, I should think not! But perhaps the killer wasn’t a human. Could it have been a bear or a troll?”

“Indeed, Gudmund, that is the same conclusion I reached. No human would have had the strength to break the moose’s back, and a bear would surely have left bite marks on the neck. No, the killer must have been a

troll of some kind, perhaps a *nökken*—one of those water-dwelling trolls could easily have stalked even a wary moose without revealing itself until the moment it attacked.”

“What happened then, Faragrim? Was there anything you could do for the poor moose?”

“Not as much as I would have liked, I’m afraid. The old fellow was beyond any hope of healing, so all I could offer him was release from his pain . . . and companionship in his passing. Kneeling beside him in the reeds, I eased his noble head onto my lap and stroked his long muzzle. Then I drew my belt knife from its sheath and held it up before his eyes so he could understand what I intended to do. And I’m sure he did, for he looked me straight in the eyes and blinked his big brown eyes twice in a very deliberate manner, as if giving me permission to proceed. Placing the tip of my blade against the weakly pulsing vessel that carries blood to the brain, I thrust the knife deeply into his neck . . . then quickly drew it down in such a way as to insure that the vessel would be severed cleanly and completely, for I did not want the poor beast to suffer longer than absolutely necessary.

“The blood spurted from his neck, though not very strongly for he had already lost so much of it from his gaping wounds. As his eyes shuttered in death, I offered a prayer to Freyja: ‘Lady of Light, hear your servant Faragrim, I pray. You who love all animals, please accept the spirit of this noble warrior into your service in Folkvang. I ask it for his sake, who cannot speak for himself.’ Then I thought I saw a valkyrie ride down from the clouds and extend her spear to gently touch the moose’s body. For a moment they were surrounded by a blinding light. Then, when I looked again, there was no trace of the body or of the valkyrie . . . and I knew that my prayer had been answered.”

Gudmund, sturdy farmer though he was,

wiped away a tear from his cheek. “That’s the most touching story I’ve ever heard. It was a wonderful thing that you did, Faragrim.”

“I felt it was the least I could do to honor a friend. But that was not yet the end of the story . . .”

“There’s more? I can hardly wait to hear it,” exclaimed Gudmund.

“Several weeks went by as I continued my dusk-to-dawn patrols of the neighborhood, pausing each time I passed the tarn where the moose had been killed to reflect upon what had happened there. Then, one day, I was roused from my musings by the approach of a small cart drawn by two of the largest forest cats I had ever seen. Strange as that sight was, however, I soon had eyes only for the cart’s lovely driver . . . none other than Freyja herself.

“Dropping to one knee, I greeted her and gave her thanks for accepting the spirit of my moose friend into Folkvang. Cheerily she replied: ‘He has made himself quite at home in the shallow, birch-ringed lake that lies close to my own home . . . an ideal place for him to spend eternity. Your compassion for one who is not of your kind is a rare and fine gift, Faragrim.’ I bowed my head and remained silent, for what can one reply to such words from a goddess?

“Then Freyja went on: ‘Ordinarily the quality of mercy should be its own reward, but in this case it seemed fitting that you should also receive something more tangible. The moose wanted you to have something personal as a token of remembrance, so he offered an antler from the remains of his earthly body. I accepted—and thanked him—on your behalf but, knowing his gift might prove awkward for you to carry around with you, I took the liberty of having it changed into a more portable form. I hope you don’t mind.’ Hearing no objection from me, she continued: ‘I carried the antler to Völund, the master-smith who dwells near

Valhalla, and asked him to use his considerable skills to render the change.’”

“‘Did you say Völund, my lady?’ I gasped. ‘That was the name of my murdered father, and he was said to be a great smith, too. Could it be the same person?’”

“‘Indeed, it is’ laughed Freyja, amused by my consternation, ‘and I’m sure that was one reason he agreed so gladly to make this gift for you.’ Having said that, she reached down into her cart and drew forth the staff I am carrying even now and which you saw me use to overcome those trolls yesterday.

“‘It’s beautiful, my lady,’ I exclaimed as I examined the three-pronged antler head of the staff, ran my fingers along the smooth yew-wood shaft, and admired the polished antler butt cap.

“‘It is that,’ opined Freyja, ‘as is all of Völund’s work, but it is also more than that. Notice the protection rune engraved in the antler head? Algiz not only stands for the spreading antlers of a moose but, in this case, actually draws its power from the spiritual essence of the very moose you helped. Call upon it only at great need . . . and use it wisely.’ Acknowledging my profuse thanks, the goddess picked up the reins of her cart, purred briefly to her team of cats, and soon they all disappeared from view.

“That’s the end of the story, Gudmund, and there ahead of us lean the stones that form the Gate of Kverndal . . . and which mark the end of our journey. Here we part company, for you can go safely hence to your brother’s steading in the valley below, while I need to return to my cave.”

“Will I never see you again?” asked Gudmund anxiously.

“Oh, I will surely look in on you from time to time as I make my rounds. And, of course, you are welcome to visit me in my cave. A runic spell shields its entrance from those who wish me ill, but to you it is always open.” Faragrim paused for a moment, then reached beneath his cloak to draw out a

shining black hunting horn, which he handed to Gudmund. "Should dire need arise, blow Windfar three times, and I will come to you at once. Now fare thee well, my friend."

"And thee also, Faragrim," Gudmund exclaimed, impulsively clasping the draug's cold, clammy hand and gripping it firmly

without hesitation or the trace of a shudder.

And, in that act of unconditional acceptance, Faragrim was struck with the realization that for the first time since his death and re-animation he had found a human being who was truly his friend, in deed as well as in word.

What Lucy Saw

by
D. S. Martin

On the day after the night on which she woke
& wandered through pools of moonlight
& spoke to the trees a whispered invitation
almost an incantation to also waken
that made them rustle in the windless air
& to almost heed her
the children became lost in an unfamiliar wood

It was then she saw him between
two mountain ashes before he vanished
like some evanescent vapour
a great lion *The* great Lion
his mane outshining the sun
there then not there where he'd been
unseen by the others leaving her verity
unverifiable unbelievable
though believed by one who'd not seen
who later received his *well done*