The Magpie And The Ape

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Herein is a Border Country tale of the origin of the English Wallflower. For it was in Olden Days that a lonely maid lived in an high Great Keep of the castle, at the behest of her father, the Earl of Tweed. His wife being dead, he feared for his daughter to be taken from him in marriage. Said daughter's visage was fair, her essential nature delicate as the flower's bloom, and to think of the loss of her maidenhead was more than he could bear. Wherefore, Avelina, as she was named, lived these three years up the winding stair at the top of The Keep, seldom visiting below. 'Twas as pleasant as a bower, with brodered hangings and a rosy fire in winter, and an huge black and white plumed magpie on the perch to make her company. But for all that, Avelina was more unhappy than the Earl's poorest thrall, because she was a prisoner. Oft times she would stand at the window and stare down on the inner bailey where pages and maidservants trod; or mayhap she would sit on her stool embroidering a beast, creeping thing, or saint upon the Bishop's damask cope; then, at whiles, she might converse with the magpie. Yet oft would she lie upon her featherbed and weep.

Now the magpie knew that work best loved casteth a spell on the worker thereof. For the Bird took note how that when'e'er Avelina would sit embroidering, the tears would cease, her white brow clear, and peace rest upon her countenance. So one day, when it saw her staring sadly out the window, the magpie spoke. Come hither my young lady and set thee to thy work. See how the heed of the serpent wants fastening beneath the Lord Crist's holy foot. But the maiden moved not.

Nay Magpie, I cannot set it there.
Why canst not? returned the Bird.
Avelina answered, 'Tis not meet for one to put beneath Crist's foot what one clutches to the bosom.

Tush! Said the Bird. What better place for it? But why say thou hast an adder to thy pure bosom? Thou art not evil!

Yet the maid protested, saying, Had I not come to this prison, I would have thought not. But now 'tis revealed: I harbor this snake of self will; I grow bitter in confinement, yea, even against God.

Then she hung her head and wept. Whereupon the magpie clucked consolingly. Thence, scattering feathers, it flew to the shutter. Now this Bird was wonderful and that not for its speech, but because 'twas magic! It perched on the shutter and studied Avelina's face with its dusky eye, the great black beak turning this way and that. Then with not a word, the Bird soared from The Keep. It circled the castle far above, seeing all going to and fro in the baileys below. But ever and anon, its gaze returned to the white-gold speck that was the face and hair of a lonely maid, fast in the hole of the tower. Thence, flapping its wings once more, the Bird embarked on a compass of the Earl's thralldom and beyond, seeking the face of another with its inward eye.

Over the greensward, past River Tweed, beyond the wooded hill, lay a neighboring estate. In a stout little fortalice abode White William, young and leal. For want of payment to the Duke he was denied a place in Baronage. In times past there was a feud over one piece of land 'twixt William's father, Baron Harold Whitefoot, and Avelina's father, the Earl of Tweed. Without said land and its tolls, which the Earl now withheld from the Whitefoots, young William could not afford to buy his title. Whereas, once upon a time, William did romp about the Earl's palace
on his knees as little Avelina’s steed, he had since been banished by reason of the feud. His father was now dead and he had never seen Avelina in her woman’s beauty dight.

On this spring day, William sat with his knights and the friar in the halle of his fortalice, planning war. Without the window, the fair day waned toward even. Tender green buds grew on brown twigs of the wych-elm, and the breeze was dainty. Of a sudden a great black bird appeared nigh the unshuttered opening. At once a solemnness descended, and the company, for a moment, was hushed (though all at unawares). And quietly William spake: Having challenged my father’s once leal friend, I am of a sudden troubled with second thoughts.

Sir Robert cried out in vexation, This vengeance hast thou prepared ere thy manhood! Shalt thou give it over now?

But William passed into gloom and made no answer.

At length the friar said to the knights, We had better take our leave. And he thought, Mayhap this cloud will pass upon the morrow. But as the friar rose to go, lo! His eyes beheld the bird which was perched on the sill. What is this!? cried he. Hast thou a pet, William?

Peering up, William’s eye lighted on the bird. Nay, I have not.

Wottest thou whence it hails? asked the friar.

I wot not, said the young noble, rising from the board. He approached said Magpie desiring to study it, but as he looked a vision clung upon his eyes, to wit: he saw himself a lad, straddled in play by a golden child. Dimly, behind them, perched a magpie. The scene changed ere the vision departed, and he beheld the maiden form of Avelina languishing in prison. All his anguish stirred and his brow was knit in toil. Anon the vision fled, and with it the bird. White William then bestirred himself; remembering that saying abroad that the Earl’s daughter was held in a keep. He said right quick, Fellows stay awhile; stay I beg. And he clomb out the window, leaving his vassals to look after.

He hearkened first after the magpie, whither it went. Finding it not, he trod up and down the greensward gathering his thoughts and seeking wisdom. Hidden from view, the bird cleaved to a branch of the wych-elm watching William at his labor. Thinking William’s earnest needed of reward, therefore, the magpie opened a store of cunning plots, imparting one to him. Eftsoons the young man’s countenance lightened, and he smiled. Returning to his companions thence, the ringing of cups prevailed; for he renewed his pledge to war.

Meanwhile, the Earl and his pet, the Barbary Ape who conversed with him by signs, clomb the winding stair of the great stone keep to visit his daughter. He bore a brace of thrushes, covered with a dainty sauce of almonds, spices and wine, on a silver platter. He drew the bolt and entered, whereupon the yellow ape commenced frolicking about the chamber, screaming and showing its yellow teeth. At length it settled in the rafters. Daughter, quoth the Earl, I bring thee tidings of war.

And she, uprist from the stool, said, What. Hast thou thrown down the gauntlet?

Nay, said he, I have been challenged by young William Whitefoot, that ungrateful whelp!

He shall dree the weird!

White William! cried Avelina. My beloved erstwhile playmate....

Fie, daughter. Call not that one beloved.

Quoth she as one dreaming, staring at the floor, I have not beheld his visage, lo, these many years.
Neither shalt thou hence, warned the Earl. Instead thou shalt behold preparations below in the baileys where we store for his siege (should he so haphly such achieve). Ere he come, a smith will climb to fasten a bolt inside yonder door. When we are in the throes, thou shalt make use of it to keep the alien knights without. At these words, the Ape screamed and stomped upon the beam with gleeful rapidity. Suzerain, thou fool! Thou art not comic but unseemly with thine antics. Behave, lest I ship thee back to The Rock whence thou camest. His speech notwithstanding, the Earl grinned fondly on the hairy yellow beast.

Just then a fluttering of wings drove their attention to the window. The magpie lighted there, following its mission to White William's meager estate. The ape, sore vexed at the bird's presence, increased its clamor by swinging about the room and screaming at the magpie. The bird clucked and trod to and fro on the sill, saying, Check check check.

Ah, spake The Earl, the twain chaffer one with another. Suzerain, becalm thine uproarious bowels ere I thrust thee from the window.

Meantime upon seeing him, the Magpie had covertly cast a spell upon The Earl, for next he said, Daughter, I know that thy confinement burdeneth thee somewhat. Come to the halle with me on the morrow. We shall feast upon the dais and have our merriment whilst the men and maids do fortify the Castle. My villeins and knights shall come hither (but I shall take care that none come nigh thee). We may make good cheer ere we be tried of that scoundrel. The Earl spake again to the yellow ape: Go to, thou ape, and descend to the halle with me for meat. Then Avelina, upon her stool, heard the dropping of the bolt, as it echoed down the keep, and the sound of her father conversing with that ape as they quitted the tower for life below.

Night passed and daybreak beamed across the Earl's thralldom, ushering wayfarers over the vast estate. These obtained entrance one by one from the porter, and the company within the fortress waxed great. Stores were laid by; straw bundles spread to cushion missiles; forges were fired. The war engines rumbled as oxen drew them to emplacement along the walls.

Late in that day, The Earl, all clothed in furs and silks with a chaplet of red stones upon his brow, clomb the stairs with the Barbary Ape and loosed the bolt. When the door was opened, the ape and bird began again to spar. The Earl threatened the twain, but to no avail. Daughter, I fear we must needs leave the Magpie in this place, lest they destroy the feast. So 'twas that Magpie stayed behind. The three began to descend, and on the stair the Earl promised Avelina that a company of minstrels was bidden to the feast. But fear not, for there be not miscreants, nor spies among them. The porter hath seen to that. Then he did but lightly pat her hand. Within the palace halle, the boards across trestles lay. The table upon the dais was linen covered, and full of delights. To wit: roasts of venison, partridge, peacock, kid, and braces of diverse poultry, each in a dainty sauce; fruits, both dried and stewed in wine; frogs, snails, and eels; breads, cheeses, flagons of wine and ale; then liquorice to make sweet the breath. About the Halle stood knights and ladies, squires and maids at boards with their trenchers, meat, and cups. There, too, fought the curs for bones among the rushes on the floor, and the Earl's pets caroused (apes, falcons, hounds, cats, and a young winged dragon or two). Thus their hearts were merry made on the eve of war.

On the dais with the nobles, at the Earl's right hand, was that yellow haired ape, eating fruits and leaves. Avelina, comely in her white lace gown, sat quietly in a canopied chair on the left hand of her father. The imprisonment had deepened her to set her apart from this frivolity. Indeed, her separation was now inwardly wrought, so that she had no fellowship with these at all (and the magpie was not here for her company). Afterwards jolly minstrels came forth, praying all good weal upon the host and guests with the raising of cups. Thence these brought forth the
pipes and lutes, and musick filled the halle. The masked harlequin appeared for his pantomime, and he proved grotesque beyond imagining. His form was sore misshapen with an hideous huge hump upon his back, and he could but hobble about almost on all fours. In dueling, his wooden sword went a-thrusting, missing his opponent in ever waxing buffoonery, until the laughter rang about the halle. At last, in defeat upon the floor, he croaked: Likewise shall William Whitefoot fight, and end, if he continue in his folly! O how the company roared!

Howsoever, nought of laughter rose in the maiden. The spectacle saddened and made her careful. Her hand was laid upon The Earl's sleeve. Father, may I take my leave?

His head the Earl inclined. Art thou tired, little one?

Yea, verily. She stood, and the Earl beckoned for a matron, but the harlequin came forth and croaked, I pray thee my Lord, if I have pleased thee with my jest, I beg, let me escort The Lady. Her I'll safely speed to yon tower. Upon my word! laughed The Earl. For thine apt performance, thou shalt have that favor. But see she speak to no man upon the way, thou ill-favored creature, thou.

The twain went thither in the darkness. The Harlequin, hobbling beside the maiden, took note on how that she withdrew herself somewhat from him. Said he, Canst thou not abide one who is misshapen, Mistress?

The maid stayed her, then said in all quietness, 'Tis not thy form, but thine erstwhile mockery I disapprove.

Did not the Harlequin thee entertain as he did the others? said he.

Nay, thou didst not.

At this the Harlequin seemed to walk a whit taller. Answer truly then, said he, hast thou any feeling for that fellow William?

Avelina glanced on him, fearing lest he be a spy. But she sighed, and turned her face towards The Keep. But lo, she said, I recall sweet fellowship from days gone by. How that he was my dearest playmate, and fairest to behold. And her voice faltered as she spake these words, dearest and fairest.

The Harlequin started. At last he said, Dost thou know what manner of man he be?

Yea, she returned. If my judgment is trusty. He is like yonder star in the firmament: all white and true; beyond my reach.

With wonderment the Harlequin swung his face up toward the black vault of heaven. Forssooth he was White William, and now his heart did bang. Fair Avelina, spake he softly, his voice no longer coarse. Fast her look was fixed on him. The knot upon his back was sore pronounced. He fumbled at it, hearkening to see if one be on watch. Then, as she looked, he began to draw a cord of flax from out his hunch. Long it waxed, and he did twist it in a coil, speaking ever low. Sweetling, I am William, and do now declare my love.

Now fair Avelina wondered: could this selfsame ugly lump be her beloved? Howsoever, she knew it on the instant, and touched him tenderly with fingers all a-tremble. Yea, I plight my troth. Now they approached The Keep, the guard of which was fast asleep owing to a potion the Harlequin had covertly given him before. William mounted up the ladder and entered that small door, and the maid forsook the starry night and clomb after. Up the winding stair they went, hand in hand, while their hearts beat sore. As they clomb, William spake in a voice both low and strong. My heart panteth after thee as deer do for the water brooks, and my troth shall be to thee alone. Such sweet sayings bestirred an answering in the maid. At length they reach the top and enter Avelina's chamber, all aglow with wax light. The magpie was nowhere to be seen.

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William hid the flaxen coil beneath the canopy bed. Then quoth he, Thou shalt make sure thine escape through the window. Fasten the cord about the timber, which thou mayst reach by drawing hither yonder chest. Thou must await my signal; to wit: When the siege tower doth overflow with men in battle, then shalt thou descend. I will straightway come for thee.

Heretofore the pair had been holding hands. Now William asked, Wilt thou grant me thy sweet kiss in token of our pledge?

Avelina answered softly, Yea, if thou wilt show me how. Whereupon, still wearing his harlequin’s mask, he embraced her and gently touched her lips with his. Then William fain would lie with her, but she, though all aroused, said, Lord, stay thy caresses dear. My maidenhead is thine as the marriage gift to thee. I pray, let all these sweet secrets remain till I am thine in name and heart, for then who shall gainsay it?

William answered, Beloved, thou art the bride without blemish, thou art wise in the bargain. He murmured, Sweetling we shall hold. He turned and strode quickly from the room, looking back but once upon her visage fair. He bethought himself to bolt the door, as had the guard done had he not slumbered. Only after the door was closed, and William’s footsteps died, had Avelina any thought on how, for his mask, she had yet to see his face.

Meanwhile, not maid nor man had taken note of that shadowy form, mutely grinning, among the rafters o’er the stair. When once the man took leave of the tower, this creature stirred. Long its reach in swinging down, descending toward the ladder. Thence the ape, traversing o’er the courtyard, was suddenly hailed from above. Whither goest, hairy mite, in such haste? The ape started then in fright and loathing. It screamed and hurried on its way, yet not ere Magpie flew at him. Now these two were a match in wizardry: The yellow beast with sorcerous power of coercion o’er unsuspecting fools, and the magpie somewhat of white power, developed in self will, the which she used to arrange things to her liking. So in magic, neither might suppress the other to gain mastery. Therefore, the bird used her talons on the primate, seizing the long talking fingers of his hands to crush them. He cried and writhed in torment. The men-at-arms ran to part them, but Magpie mounted on the wing and vanished into night. When presented to The Earl, the ape cried aloud, but the noble could make nought of it, for Suzerain’s fingers were a bloody tangle. Hence, his treacherous mission was carried out in vain. The Earl coddled his pet, and did call for steeped herbs and poultices for its fingers. He would fain have ordered Magpie’s execution, had it not been for his daughter’s want of company in her doom.

Now proceed we to The Times of Battle betwixt William Whitefoot and the Earl of Tweed. Wreaths of smoke do rise from the Outer Bailey of the Castle, for The Earl was not forewarned of William’s missiles of Greek fire; which do light among the straw, catching all aflame. Meanwhile, The Earl’s men, from hoards upon the walls, pour boiling oil and molten lead on foes who chance beneath. Arrows, both from the yew and armour-piercing crossbow, let fly through the early morning air. But underground William and certain of his villeins privily finish a tunnel which had been some months in the digging. Whilst William hit with pickaxe underground, he spake low beneath his breath, saying, Thou art comely as a coppice of sweet chestnuts, oak, or ash. The smell of thy garment is like the forest at daybreak. Such things quoth he whilst the sweat rolled from off his back; and thoughts of Avelina rode his mind like stallions. When then the hewing and digging were now finished, and the pillar set in place beneath the outer wall, William covered all in rendered fat and lit it with a torch. And once upon the greensward, he watched as now The Wall fell down, shaking the ground with thunderings. How William’s men did roar! The ground shook beneath the war horses as they rode to the breach. Armour glinting, swords and battle axes cleaving, heads a-flying, men sundered one another in
the Outer Bailey of the Castle.

‘Twas beyond the curtain wall of the inner bailey, high up in the keep, that tenderhearted Avelina saw with horror and palpitations. Betimes she flung herself upon her knees and prayed aloud. Howbeit she hearkened not to that broken mortar, clinking down the chimney. At sight of the siege tower moving slowly through the breach, she hasted to draw forth the chest beneath the crossbeam. How her heart banged as she fashioned up the knot. Of a sudden, accusation in full measure smote her: Was she not betrayer of her father’s trust? She stayed nigh the opening, dressed all in a green gallooned gown and bright yellow bonnet. There the understanding grew: The Earl did not trust her, for he had her in a prison. Now she was becalmed, her inner person coming forth. At that moment, the siege tower spilled its men right o’er the curtain wall. Avelina clomb out on the sill, perilous high. The wind blew, but she blenched not as she cast the chord down the dizzy heights. Now Magpie fluttered past from going to and fro amongst the battlers, helping William’s cause. The bird watched as, all green and yellow, comely as spring, Avelina began now to descend.

Yonder, across the courtyard in helm and hauberk clad, William saw the green gown billow in the wind. He doffed his helm and stayed to see the blossom of his heart in her jeopardy, before starting towards the tower. But as she held, the chord let loose. The flower dropped: his heart stood. How the echo of William’s lament mingled with the roar of young man at his war! And fallow his blade fell clattering down. ‘Twas then a foe smote from behind, and, swiftly swinging with his mace, he broke William’s skull.

Now Magpie, circling up above, was witness to what passed. Swooping low she sought the man amongst the dead, but lo! he was not. She flew then to the tower, seeking there the broken body of her mistress, when lo! there was none such. Howsoever, there grew a green stemmed yellow flower, dight with veins of red; known thereafter as The Wallflower. And there too grew a fair white clump of that flower named Sweet William. Thence Magpie hearkened to a scream and, looking up, beheld Suzerain the Ape, swinging on the shutter. She wist that he loosed the chord with his prehensile feet. Sadly taking to the wing, Magpie clomb above the tumult smoking. If thou’d look after, thou’d see her belly white, and hear her on the wing a-crying, Maaaaaag, maaaaaag, maaaaaag...