

Once and Future

Michael O'Murphy woke with the mother of all hangovers splitting his head in half, churning up his stomach like a winter storm off the Orkneys, and a companion in his bed.

What in Jaysus did I do last night?

The pain in his head began just above his eyes, wrapped around the sides, and met in the back. His stomach did not bear thinking about. His companion was long, cold, and unmoving, but very heavy.

I took a board to bed? Was I that hard up for a sheila? Michael, you're slipping!

He was lying on his side, as always. The unknown object was at his back. At the moment it was no more identifiable than a hard presence along his spine, uncomfortable and unyielding. He wasn't entirely certain he wanted to find out exactly what it was until he mentally retraced his steps of the previous evening. Granted, this was irrational, but a man with the mother of all hangovers is not a rational being.

The reason for his monumental drunk was clear enough in his mind; the pink slip from his job at the docks, presented to him by the foreman at the end of the day. That would be yesterday, Friday, if I haven't slept the weekend through.

He wasn't the only bloke cashiered yesterday; they'd laid off half the men at the shipyard. So it's back on the dole, and thank God Almighty I didn't get serious with that little bird I met on holiday. Last thing I need is a woman nagging at me for losing me job and it wasn't even me own fault. Depression piled atop the splitting head and the foul stomach. Michael O'Murphy was not the sort of man who accepted the dole with any kind of grace other than ill.

He cracked his right eye open, winced at the stab of light that penetrated into his cranium, and squinted at the floor beside his bed.

Yes, there was the pink slip, crumpled into a wad, beside his boots—and two bottles of Jameson's, one empty, the other half full and frugally corked.

Holy Mary Mother of God. I don't remember sharing out that often, so I must've drunk most of it myself. No wonder I feel like a walk through Purgatory.

He closed his eye again, and allowed the whiskey bottle to jog a few more memories loose. So, he'd been sacked, and half the boys with him. And they'd all decided to drown their sorrows together.

But not at a pub, and not at pub prices. You can't get royally, roaring drunk at a pub unless you've got a royal allowance to match. So we all bought our bottles and met at Tommy's place.

There'd been a half-formed notion to get shellacked there, but Tommy had a car, and Tommy had an idea. He'd seen some nonsense on the telly about "Iron Johns" or some such idiocy, over in America—

Said we was all downtrodden and "needed to get in touch with our inner selves"; swore that we had to get "empowered" to get back on our feet, and wanted to head out into the country— There'd been some talk about "male bonding" ceremonies, pounding drums, carrying on like a lot of Red Indians—and

drinking of course. Tommy went on like it was some kind of communion; the rest of them had already started on their bottles before they got to Tommy's, and at that point, a lot of pounding and dancing half-naked and drinking sounded like a fine idea. So off they went, crammed into Tommy's aging Morris Minor with just enough room to get their bottles to their lips.

At some point they stopped and all piled out; Michael vaguely recalled a forest, which might well have been National Trust lands and it was a mercy they hadn't been caught and hauled off to gaol. Tommy had gotten hold of a drum somewhere; it was in the boot with the rest of the booze. They all grabbed bottles and Tommy got the drum, and off they went into the trees like a daft May Day parade, howling and carrying on like bleeding loonies.

How Tommy made the fire—and why it hadn't been seen, more to the point!—Michael had not a clue. He remembered a great deal of pounding on the drum, more howling, shouting and swearing at the bosses of the world, a lot of drinking, and some of the lads stripping off their shirts and capering about like so many monkeys. About then was when I got an itch for some quiet. He and his bottles had stumbled off into the trees, following an elusive moonbeam, or so he thought he remembered. The singing and pounding had faded behind him, and in his memory the trees loomed the way they had when he was a nipper and everything seemed huge. They were like trees out of the old tales, as big as the one they call Robin Hood's Oak in Sherwood. There was only one way to go since he didn't even consider turning back, and that was to follow the path between them, and the fey bit of moonlight that lured him on.

Was there a mist? I think there was. Wait! That was when the real path appeared. There had been mist, a curious, blue mist. It had muffled everything, from the sounds of his own footsteps to the sounds of his mates back by the fire. Before too very long, he might have been the only human being alive in a forest as old as time and full of portentous silence.

He remembered that the trees thinned out at just about the point where he was going to give up his ramble and turn back. He had found himself on the shores of a lake. It was probably an ordinary enough pond by daylight, but last night, with the mist drifting over it and obscuring the farther shore, the utter and complete silence of the place, and the moonlight pouring down over everything and touching everything with silver, it had seemed . . . uncanny, a bit frightening, and not entirely in the real world at all.

He had stood there with a bottle in each hand, a monument to inebriation, held there more by inertia than anything else, he suspected. He could still see the place as he squeezed his eyes shut, as vividly as if he stood there at that moment. The water was like a sheet of plate glass over a dark and unimaginable void; the full moon hung just above the dark mass of the trees behind him, a great round Chinese lantern of a moon, and blue-white mist floated everywhere in wisps and thin scarves and great opaque billows. A curious boat rested by the bank not a meter from him, a rough-hewn thing apparently made from a whole tree-trunk and shaped with an axe. Not even the reeds around the boat at his feet moved in the breathless quiet.

Then, breaking the quiet, a sound; a single splash in the middle of the lake. Startled, he had seen an arm rise up out of the water, beckoning.

He thought, of course, that someone had fallen in, or been swimming and took a cramp. One of his mates, even, who'd come round to the other side and taken a fancy for a dip. It never occurred to him to go back to the others for help, just as it never occurred to him not to rush out there to save whoever it was.

He dropped his bottles into the boat at his feet, and followed them in. He looked about for the tether to cast off, but there wasn't one—looked for the oars to row out to the swimmer, but there weren't any of those, either. Nevertheless, the boat was moving, and heading straight for that beckoning arm as if he was willing it there. And it didn't seem at all strange to him that it was doing so, at least, not at the time.

He remembered that he'd been thinking that whoever this was, she'd fallen in fully clothed, for the arm had a long sleeve of some heavy white stuff. And it had to be a she—the arm was too white and soft to be a man's. It wasn't until he got up close, though, that he realized there was nothing showing but the arm, that the woman had been under an awfully long time—and that the arm sticking up out of the water was holding something.

Still, daft as it was, it wasn't important— He'd ignored everything but the arm, ignored things that didn't make any sense. As the boat got within range of the woman, he'd leaned over the bow so far that he almost fell in, and made a grab for that upraised arm.

But the hand and wrist slid through his grasp somehow, although he was sure he'd taken a good, firm hold on them, and he fell back into the boat, knocking himself silly against the hard wooden bottom, his hands clasped tight around whatever it was she'd been holding. He saw stars, and more than stars, and when he came to again, the boat was back against the bank, and there was no sign of the woman.

But he had her sword.

Her sword? I had her sword?

Now he reached behind him to feel the long, hard length of it at his back.

By God—it is a sword!

He had no real recollection of what happened after that; he must have gotten back to the lads, and they all must have gotten back to town in Tommy's car, because here he was.

In bed with a sword.

I've heard of being in bed with a battle-axe, but never a sword.

Slowly, carefully, he sat up. Slowly, carefully, he reached into the tumble of blankets and extracted the drowning woman's sword.

It was real, it looked old, and it was damned heavy. He hefted it in both hands, and grunted with surprise. If this was the kind of weapon those old bastards used to hack at one another with in the long-ago days that they made films of, there must have been as much harm done by breaking bones as by whacking bits off.

It wasn't anything fancy, though, not like you saw in the flicks or the comics; a plain, black, leather-wrapped hilt, with what looked like brass bits as the cross-piece and a plain, black leather-bound sheath. Probably weighed about as much as four pry-bars of the same length put together.

He put his hand to the hilt experimentally, and pulled a little, taking it out of the sheath with the vague notion of having a look at the blade itself.

PENDRAGON!

The voice shouted in his head, an orchestra of nothing but trumpets, and all of them played at top volume.

He dropped the sword, which landed on his toes. He shouted with pain, and jerked his feet up reflexively, and the sword dropped to the floor, half out of its sheath. "What the hell was that?" he howled, grabbing his abused toes in both hands, and rocking back and forth a little. He was hardly expecting an answer, but he got one anyway.

It was I, Pendragon.

He felt his eyes bugging out, and he cast his gaze frantically around the room, looking for the joker who'd snuck inside while he was sleeping. But there wasn't anyone, and there was nowhere to hide. The rented room contained four pieces of furniture—his iron-framed bed, a cheap deal bureau and nightstand, and a chair. He bent over and took a peek under the bed, feeling like a frightened old aunty, but there was nothing there, either.

You're looking in the wrong place.

"I left the radio on," he muttered, "that's it. It's some daft drama. Gawd, I hate those BBC buggers!" He reached over to the radio on the nightstand and felt for the knob. But the radio was already off, and cold, which meant it hadn't been on with the knob broken.

Pendragon, I am on the floor, where you dropped me.

He looked down at the floor. The only things besides his boots were the whiskey bottles and the sword.

"I never heard of no Jameson bottles talking in a bloke's head before," he muttered to himself, as he massaged his toes, "and me boots never struck up no conversations before."

Don't be absurd, said the voice, tartly. You know what I am, as you know what you are.

The sword. It had to be the sword. "And just what am I, then?" he asked it, wondering when the boys from the Home were going to come romping through the door to take him off for a spot of rest. This is daft. I must have gone loopy. I'm talking to a piece of metal, and it's talking back to me.

You are the Pendragon, the sword said patiently, and waited. When he failed to respond except with an uncomprehending shrug, it went on—but with far less patience. You are the Once and Future King. The Warrior Against the Darkness. It waited, and he still had no notion what it was talking about.

You are ARTHUR, it shouted, making him wince. You are King Arthur, Warleader and Hero!

"Now it's you that's loopy," he told it sternly. "I don't bloody well think! King Arthur indeed!"

The only recollection of King Arthur he had were things out of his childhood—stories in the schoolbooks, a Disney flick, Christmas pantomimes. Vague images of crowns and red-felt robes, of tin swords and papier-mache armor flitted through his mind—and talking owls and daft magicians. "King Arthur! Not likely!"

You are! the sword said, sounding desperate now. You are the Pendragon! You

have been reborn into this world to be its Hero! Don't you remember?

He only snorted. "I'm Michael O'Murphy, I work at the docks, I'll be on the dole on Monday, and I don't bloody think anybody needs any bloody more Kings these days! They've got enough troubles with the ones they've-Gawd!"

He fell back into the bed as the sword bombarded his mind with a barrage of images, more vivid than the flicks, for he was in them. Battles and feasts, triumph and tragedy, success and failure—a grim stand against the powers of darkness that held for the short space of one man's lifetime.

It all poured into his brain in the time it took for him to breathe twice. And when he sat up again, he remembered.

All of it.

He blinked, and rubbed his mistreated head. "Gawd!" he complained. "You might warn a lad first!"

Now do you believe? The sword sounded smug.

Just like the nuns at his school, when they'd gotten done whapping him "for his own good."

"I believe you're damn good at shoving a lot of rubbish into a man's head and making him think it's his," he said stubbornly, staring down at the shining expanse of blade, about ten centimeter's worth, that protruded out of the sheath. "I still don't see where all this makes any difference, even if I do believe it."

If the sword could have spluttered, it probably would have. You don't—you're Arthur! I'm Excalibur! You're supposed to take me up and use me!

"For what?" he asked, snickering at the mental image of prying open tins of beans with the thing. "You don't make a good pry-bar, I can't cut wood with you even if I had a wood stove, which I don't, nobody's going to believe you're a fancy saw-blade, and there's laws about walking around with something like you strapped to me hip. What do I do, fasten a sign to you, and go on a protest march?"

You—you— Bereft of words, the sword resorted to another flood of images. Forewarned by the last one, Michael stood his ground.

But this time the images were harder to ignore.

He saw himself taking the sword and gathering his fighters to his side—all of his friends from the docks, the ones who'd bitched along with him about what a mess the world was in. He watched himself making an army out of them, and sending them out into the streets to clean up the filth there. He saw himself as the leader of a new corps of vigilantes who tracked down the pushers, the perverts, the thugs and the punks and gave them all a taste of what they had coming to them.

He saw his army making the city safe for people to live in, saw them taking back the night from the Powers of Evil.

He saw more people flocking to his banner and his cause, saw him carrying his crusade from city to city, until a joyous public threw the House of Hanover out of Buckingham Palace and installed him on the throne, and a ten-year-old child could carry a gold bar across the length of the island and never fear a

robber or a molester.

Or try this one, if that doesn't suit you!

This time he saw himself crossing to Ireland, confronting the leadership of every feuding party there, and defeating them, one by one, in challenge-combat. He saw himself bringing peace to a land that had been torn by strife for so long that there wasn't an Irish child alive that didn't know what a knee-capper was. He saw the last British Tommy leaving the island with a smile on his face and a shamrock in his lapel, withdrawing in good order since order itself had been restored. He saw plenty coming back to the land, prosperity, saw Ireland taking a major role in the nations of the world, and "Irish honor" becoming a byword for "trust." Oh, this was cruel, throwing a vision like that in his face! He wasn't for British Rule, but the IRA was as bad as the PLO by his lights—and there wasn't anything he could do about either.

Until now.

Or here—widen your horizons, lift your eyes beyond your own sordid universe!

This time he started as before, carried the sword to Ireland and restored peace there, and went on—on to the Continent, to Eastern Europe, taking command of the UN forces there and forcing a real and lasting peace by the strength of his arm. Oh, there was slaughter, but it wasn't a slaughter of the innocents but of the bastards that drove the fights, and in the end that same ten-year-old child could start in Galway and end in Sarejevo, and no one would so much as dirty the lace on her collar or offer her an unkind word.

The sword released him, then, and he sat blinking on his shabby second-hand bed, in his dingy rented room, still holding his aching toes in both hands. It all seemed so tawdry, this little world of his, and all he had to do to earn a greater and brighter one was to reach out his hand.

He looked down at the sword at the side of his bed, and the metal winked smugly up at him. "You really think you have me now, don't you," he said bitterly to it.

It said nothing. It didn't have to answer.

But he had answers enough for all the temptations in his own mind. Because now he remembered Arthur—and Guinevere, and Lancelot and Agravaine and Morgaine.

And Mordred.

Oh yes. He had no doubt that there would be a Mordred out there, somewhere, waiting for him the moment he took up the sword. He hadn't been any too careful, AIDS notwithstanding, and there could be any number of bastards scattered from his seed. Hell, there would be a Mordred even if it wasn't his son. For every Warrior of the Light there was a Warrior of the Dark; he'd seen that quite, quite clearly. For every Great Friend there was always the Great Betrayer—hadn't Peter betrayed Christ by denying him? For every Great Love there was the Great Loss.

It would not be the easy parade of victories the sword showed him; he was older and far, far wiser than the boy-Arthur who'd taken Excalibur the last time. He was not to be dazzled by dreams. The most likely of the scenarios to succeed was the first—some bloke in New York had done something like that, called his lads the "Guardian Angels"—and even he hadn't succeeded in cleaning up more than a drop or two of the filth in one city, let alone hundreds.

That scenario would only last as long as it took some punk's parents to sue him. What good would a sword be in court, eh? What would he do, slice the judge's head off?

And this was the age of the tabloids, of smut-papers. They'd love him for a while, then they'd decide to bring him down. If they'd had a time with Charles and Di, what would they do with him—and Guinevere, and Lancelot—and Mordred?

For Mordred and Morgaine were surely here, and they might even have got a head start on him. They could be waiting for him to appear, waiting with hired thugs to take him out.

For that matter, Mordred might be a lawyer, ready for him at this very moment with briefs and briefcase, and he'd wind up committed to the loony asylum before he got two steps! Or he might be a smut reporter, good at digging up dirt. His own, real past wouldn't make a pretty sight on paper.

Oh no. Oh, no.

"I don't think so, my lad," he said, and before the sword could pull any clever tricks, he reached down, and slammed it home in the sheath.

Three hours and six aspirins later, he walked into the nearest pawn shop with a long bundle wrapped in old newspapers under his arm. He handed it across the counter to the wizened old East Indian who kept the place.

The old boy unwrapped the papers, and peered at the sword without a hint of surprise. God alone knew he'd probably seen stranger things pass across his counter. He slid it out of its sheath and examined the steel before slamming it back home. Only then did he squint through the grill at Michael.

"It's mild steel. Maybe antique, maybe not, no way of telling. Five quid," he said. "Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it," said the Pendragon.