

O for a Fiery Gloom and Thee

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La Belle Dame Sans Merci was kin to Jack A-Lantern: a whim o' the wisp alloyed from light and shadow, air and dew. Such contradictory beings cannot long endure; their warring elements long for separation and their fated dissolutions are rarely quiet, never without pain. How should such a being look upon a man, save with wild wild eyes?

La Belle Dame Sans Merci could not stroll upon the mead like any earth-bound being for her footfall was far too light, but she had the precious power of touch which earthbound beings take overmuch for granted. She could not be seen by light of noon, but when she did appear—bathed by the baleful moon's unholiness—there was magic in her image.

Salome the enchantress knew how to dance, and stir the fire of Hell in the hearts of those who watched, but La Belle Dame Sans Merci knew how to lie as still as still could be, and ignite the fire of Purgatory by sight alone.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci was a daughter of the faery folk, but it is not given to the faery folk to know their fathers and their mothers as humans do. It is easy for faery folk to believe that they owe their conception to the fall of the dew from their father the Sky: from the dew which never reaches Mother Earth but drifts upon the air as wayward mist. That, at least, is the story they tell one another; but what it might mean to them no merely human being could ever understand. Humans are cursed by the twin burdens of belief and unbelief but the faery folk are no more capable of faith than of mass; they have the gift of touch without the leaden heaviness of solidity, and they have the gift of imagination without the parsimonious degradations of accuracy.

The earliest adventures of La Belle Dame Sans Merci were not concerned with warriors or princes but with men unfit for oral or written record—mere passers-by on the rough-hewn roads of myth and history—but she always felt that she was made for the Royal Hunt and for the defiance of chivalry. She always felt that she was made to tempt the very best of the children of the Iron Age, to draw the users of arms and armor from the terrible path of progress. Because she had no human need to transmute her feelings into beliefs she had no human need to ask *why* she was made that way—or whether she was *made* at all—so she followed the force of her impulse with all blithe innocence, her eyes as wide as they were wild.

Like the rough-hewn roads of myth and history, the many roads of England were not at this time wont to run *straight*. The Romans had come but the Romans had gone again; their legacy remained only in a few long marching-paths, and it was more than possible that the few would become fewer as time went by and Rome became but a memory.

Made for men a-foot and horses poorly shod, the older roads of England wound around slopes and thickets, ponds and streams, always avoiding places of ill-repute, always preferring the gentle gradient and the comfortable footfall. In poor light such pathways become mazy and treacherous and there is no cause for astonishment in the fact that far more travelers set out in those days than ever arrived at their destinations.

These older ways were the roads that the faery folk loved—not so much for their actual use, but rather as a means of design and definition: a map of the world whose interstices could provide their home and habitat. The faery folk had hated Rome, and they hated echoes of Rome with equal

fervor. They hated arms and armor because arms and armor were the mechanics of empire, and they hated knighthood and chivalry because knighthood and chivalry were the ideals of empire.

When the Romans had gone, there still remained in the population they left behind the idea of a Great Britain and a concomitant cause of fealty and fellowship. The idea that *Great* Britain was the property of petty kings ambitious to be Once and Future Kings, and the guiding light of counselors ambitious to be Magi. There was more than one Arthur, more than one Merlin and more than one Round Table—but they all became one in the labyrinth of myth and history because they were all bound into one by the idea of empire and the notion that all roads should run *straight*, cutting through slopes and thickets, filling in ponds and bridging streams, and frankly disregarding matters of ill-repute.

The idea of Great Britain and the dream to which it gave birth would probably have come to nothing, had it not been for the Church, but Rome was replaced by Christendom, and Christendom returned to the England the Romans had abandoned. The actual empire of Rome was replaced by the imaginary empire of God, which was all the more dangerous to the mazy roads of England and myth by virtue of its ingenious abstraction.

Christendom gave the knights of England a Holy Grail which none of them was good enough to touch, and made them mad with virtue as they strove for worthiness. The idea of chivalry had never quite contrived to extinguish lust from their hearts, but the idea of the Grail was all the stronger for its manifest absurdity; it forced the minds of knights and princes into straight and narrow paths, so that their vaulting ambition became ever-more-narrowly focused on broad, straight *highways*: highways fit for ironclad chariots of vulgar fire.

Because of chivalry and Christendom it was not easy for La Belle Dame Sans Merci to follow the force of her defining impulse, but she was a creature of paradox from the very start: an amalgam of elements at war. For folk such as her there is no end but catastrophe, no medium but hazard.

That evening, a knight whose name was Florian had sent his horse to a well-appointed stable and his servants to sleep in the straw. He could have had a bed for himself, a loaf of bread and a cup of mead, and dreamless sleep—but that was not his way. Sir Florian was a chaste knight oft

disposed to prayer, to the rapt contemplation of the heavens, and to the frank disregard of matters of ill-repute. Rather than dispossess a doleful but dutiful host of the only good mattress for miles around he set himself to sleep beneath the stars, at one of those mysterious crossroads where the winding paths of myth and England intersect in a tangled knot. He had been warned of Jack A-Lanterns and their kin, but he considered his stubborn virtue to be proof against all temptation.

There are those who say that men see most and best when blinded, but the principle of pedantry defines such persons as fools and poets. The prosaic accuracy of the matter is that men see *most* in gentle sunlight, but *best* when they are no more than half-blinded; it is then that light and shadow have the greatest power of conjuration. The stars shone brightly enough that night, but the autumn air was cold and the mists condensed as soon as the sun had set.

Long afterward, Sir Florian thought that his ill-remembered visitor might have come from the direction of the lake, perhaps from behind its rampart of withered sedge. In the beginning, however, all he knew was that she was suddenly *there*, her silver hair hanging loose about her shoulders. She was clad in white—or so it seemed against the darkness of the night—and he might have taken her for a saint, had it not been for her wild eyes.

Even though the faery was more beautiful by far than any human woman he had ever seen, without the least trace of a pock-mark on either cheek, the innocent but armored Florian would have thought her good *had it not been for the wildness in her eyes*.

"What dost thou want with me, Lady Fair?" he asked, abridging the final word as half a hundred men had done before, without quite knowing why.

"I'd like a garland for my head," she told him, as she had told half a hundred before, "and bracelets for my arms. Summer's all but dead, and I must mourn her passing."

For a precious moment, Sir Florian hesitated. The lady stood as still as still could be, and his eyes had never beheld anything so marvelous. He felt that if he turned aside from the vision he would never see anything so lovely in all his life—but a man in search of Christendom's Grail is not in search of loveliness.

"I will not give thee anything," the knight replied, with a catch in his throat. "I know what thou art by the hectic wildness of thine eyes." Saying so—and with considerable effort of will—Sir Florian drew his sword and raised it up before him, so that the hilt and handguard were displayed in the sign of the holy cross.

To his consternation, the lady did not disappear. Nor did she move, for she had the art of lying still even when she stood erect. Had she only moved, the spell might have been broken, but she was as still as still could be and her beauty had all the force of sorcery. She waited for a moment before she replied: a moment sufficient to win the damnation of any ordinary man.

"If thou wishest to be rid of me," she said, in the end, "thou hast only to banish me with a threefold conjuration. Do so, and thou wilt never see me again although thou livest a hundred years and more—but I must warn thee that if uncertainty should cause thee to falter or hesitate in mid-injunction, I shall have the power to trouble thy most secret dreams."

Had Sir Florian been as true a knight as Parsifal or Galahad he would have called upon the name of God without delay, and pronounced the threefold curse as easily as any other feat of simple arithmetic but he was what he was and the thought that sprang to the forefront of his mind was a question.

Can a man sin in his dreams?

Had the question been followed by an answer the knight might yet have been saved, but it was not. He did not know the answer. Whether his ignorance was folly or wisdom, he did not know the answer.

"In the name of the Lord," he cried, "I banish thee! I banish thee! I ... banish thee!"

When she vanished on the instant, neither recoiling from his curse nor turning on her heel, nor fading into the mists that dressed the shore of the lake, the knight almost believed that he had won. No sooner had the faery gone, however, than he felt an ache in his heart born of the knowledge that he would never see her like again should he live a hundred years and more—unless she came to him in a troublesome and secret dream.

Again the thought came into his mind: *Can a man sin in his dreams?*

Now, alas, he knew the answer. He knew it with a certainty that charmed and terrified him, in equal and by no means paradoxical parts.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci could work her wiles in the world of dreams as easily as any other. She preferred the world of mist and stars and mazy roads, but that was merely her whim. There were those among the faery folk even in those days who thought the empire of the earth far overrated, and not worth fighting for, but La Belle Dame Sans Merci was not among them. She loved the air and the dew, the light and the shadow which made her earthly form, despite that they were elements at war which would, in time, tear her raggedly apart.

She went to Sir Florian in his dreams that very night, as he had all-but-invited her to do with a moment's hesitation in his speech. She bade him come to her, while she lay as still as still could be—stiller by far than any human woman could ever have contrived at any distance from the brink of death. She was as delicately pale as a wisp of frosty mist, but she had the gift of touch unspoiled by the contempt of familiarity. La Belle Dame Sans Merci touched the knight as lightly as the forefinger of fever, and set the fire of Purgatory alight throughout his kindling flesh.

Sir Florian gave her a garland for her head, woven from prettier flowers than ever grew in the earthly spring, perfumed more fragrantly than any musk of nature or artifice. He bound her hands and waist with vines and she thrilled to the binding, knowing that every circle was a fortress wall imprisoning his heart. He set her upon his horse so that they might ride together, both astride, so that the rhythm of the stallion's gallop might carry them beyond the reach of any roads, to the jeweled infinity east of the sun and west of the moon and the quiet eternity beyond.

And so they rode, imprisoned both by the saddle and harness which contained them, borne by the power of a tireless mount, from the curving roads to the undulant hills and away into the airy wilderness, where the height made them giddy and giddier, until the subtler rhythm of a horse's sturdy heart displaced the clatter of its hoofbeats and they passed at last into the jeweled infinity east of the sun and west of the moon.

Then La Belle Dame Sans Merci took Sir Florian, in her turn, into the warmer and warmest depths of the motherly earth: to those caverns measureless to man that lie beneath the purgatorial realms of Tartarus. There she sang to him, and sang again, and gazed at him with such apparent adoration that he closed her wild wild eyes with kisses, unable to

bear the yearning of her stare.

The knight unwound the binding vines from the faery's helpless wrists while she trembled sightless in his arms, drawing every vestige of intoxication from the pressure of his body upon hers and the congruent pounding of their hearts. She took them from him, and opened her eyes again, commanding him to tilt his head and bare his throat.

There was no hesitation this time, no faltering in his resolve. It was not that he was not afraid, but only that he was content to savor his fear as he savored every least sensation which still had the power to stir him, all equalized as pleasure.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci wound the vine about Sir Florian's slender neck, and began to draw it tighter. The pressure she exerted was gentle at first, and it was only by the slowest imaginable degrees that it grew more and more insistent.

Now he closed his own eyes, even though there had not been the least trace of wildness in his sotted gaze.

Still it was not finished, for the sense of touch still remained to Sir Florian's dizzied mind, and for the first time since consciousness was born in his infant brain the knight felt as a faery might feel, taking nothing of that sensation for granted. He could never have done so had he been awake, but he was not. In dreams, sometimes, even humans are privileged to forget the follies and fervors of flesh. For a moment and more Sir Florian was well-nigh incorporeal, yet gifted still with the sense of touch.

Had the knight been truly incorporeal, of course, the strangling vine could not have harmed him; but even in dreams, the follies and fatalities of flesh may reassert their sullen shift upon the human form.

When the delicious moment was gone, Sir Florian fell into the sleep within sleep: an abyssal deep as far beyond the shallows of dreamless peace as quiet eternity lies beyond the jeweled infinity east of the sun and west of the moon.

The story would have ended there but for one thing.

It did not matter in the least to La Belle Dame Sans Merci that Sir

Florian had felt, if only for an instant, as a faery might feel. She knew it, of course, but there was nothing in his momentary revaluation of the preciousness of touch to strike a spark of empathy. When she drew back from him, however, and saw him lying cushioned in the earth, *as still as still could be*, she saw for the first time how beautiful he was.

It occurred to her, in a way that no other notion had ever occurred to her before, that he was unusual among his own kind—and perhaps unique.

When she had appeared to the knight by the lake the faery had only seen him in general terms. The wildness of her own eyes has ensured that when she looked at him she saw nothing but arms and armor, holiness and chivalry, empire and progress. When she had first come to him in his dream she had seen even less, for she had been in the grip of her own passion. There is nothing human about a faery's passion, but it is passion nevertheless, fiercer in its own way than the lumpen kind of lust which oozes in a human's veins. It was she, then, who had consented to be tied about the wrists and waist, knowing that the binder is more securely captive than the bound. It was she who had consented to be placed astride his mount so that the two of them might ride from the earth into the sky, to soar beyond the limitations of the air, knowing that the commanded is more securely in control than the commander. It was she, then, who had been caught between light and dark, as between full sight and blindness, seeing so much *more* as to be convinced that she saw *everything*.

It was she, now, who realized with unaccustomed, appalling and massive accuracy that the *best* sight is not necessarily the *most* sight, and that beauty works most insidiously in misty uncertainty.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci touched her hand to her own throat, and asked herself whether she rather than he might have been more securely strangled by the knot that she had made. She closed her own less-than-wild eyes in order to wonder whether *his* consent might conceivably have more power than *her* command.

And she did not know the answer.

For the moment, at least, she did not know the answer.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci was afraid, and could not count her fear solely in the common currency of intensity, in which all is equalized as pleasure.

She was afraid for herself, and rightly so. Creatures of paradox cannot abide *doubt*. Doubt is the crack which opens the way to destruction.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci might still have saved herself, if she had searched assiduously for the answer to her question, found it and made it fast—but she did not.

Instead, she murmured the words which came spontaneously into her head as she looked down at the pale Sir Florian, who was lying as still as still could be.

"O for a fiery gloom and thee," she whispered, wishing as the words escaped her that the two of them might be other than they were, further elsewhere and further elsewhen than the jeweled infinity east of the sun and west of the moon or the quiet eternity beyond.

Alas, there is no elsewhere or elsewhen beyond infinity and eternity, for any such place and time would be a blatant contradiction in terms—and neither human nor faery can be other than they are, however paradoxical their natures might be.

Sir Florian awoke with the light of dawn and the warning words of a warrior host echoing in his ears. It seemed to him, although he could not quite imagine why, that kings and princes had come to him, with all their armored knights in train, with the pallor of death upon all their faces, crying: "La Belle Dame Sans Merci! La Belle Dame Sans Merci! La Belle Dame Sans Merci hath thee in thrall!"

He found himself on a cold hillside far above the lake and its miasmic mists. While he watched the silver light of dawn play upon the clouds clustered on the eastern horizon and a few frail sunbeams flickering in the nearby mists the knight felt a flush of fever in his heart and upon his cheek; but when he rose to his feet the fever died like the vestige of a dream and when stronger rays of the rising sun burst through the clouds a moment afterward he saw the golden track it laid upon the still and silent waters of the lake as a great straight road connecting earth with Heaven.

In that instant of revelation, Sir Florian knew that it would not matter how many kings were fated to fall in battle, nor how many knights were doomed to perish in hopeless quest of the Holy Grail of Christendom. He *knew*, without a moment's faltering, that the cause of progress and empire

could not be stopped, nor even significantly interrupted, and that Great Britain would one day exist.

He knew, too, that he ought to feel proud of his knowledge, grateful for his certainty. He knew that the gift of this revelation was a token that he had won the greatest battle of all: the battle of right over wrong, of reality over myth, of reason over emotion. Within this knowledge, however, there was the faintest seed of doubt—not doubt that it was true, but doubt that truth was as precious as he had been taught to hold it.

He noticed then that although dawn had broken, there had been no chorus of voices to greet it. No birds sang.

Autumn had not yet given way to winter, but no birds sang.

Sir Florian shivered then, in the cold morning air. A strange thought came into his head, which he could not understand at all but which filled him with a longing more desperate than any he had known before or ever would again.

O for a fiery gloom and thee!

He could not understand at first what it was that he longed for, or why, but the thought persisted nevertheless, as plaintive as the echo of a soul torn apart by damnation, until he began to remember. He never recovered all the memory, but in the fullness of time he remembered far more than enough, with the consequence that the enigmatic thought echoed down his straight bright days—and deeper still in his long and lonely nights—though he lived to be a hundred years and more.

O for a fiery gloom—and thee!