

Gene Wolfe

Under Hill

SIR BRADWEN, THAT FAMOUS paladin, had heard stories of the Hill of Glass in far-off Camelot. With Arthur's leave, he had ridden far and sailed perilous seas. For seventy days thereafter it seemed the tale fled even as he approached it, for at every village men pointed to the place where rose the Sun, and swore it was but two days journey more -- or three. Or a fortnight.

And yet

The tale gained substance at each new place. The size of the hill diminished. Likewise the difficulty of the lower slopes. It was not merely of glass, but of green glass of about the color of this leaf, sir. The princess, once only a beautiful lady from a remote country, gained a name: Apple Blossom. And when Sir Bradwen protested that neither he nor any other man in Christendom had heard of a lady so named, his informants merely shrugged, and declared that she ought to know -- an argument he found difficult to refute.

At length he encountered a merchant, a solid no-nonsense trader in wool and fleeces, who declared that he had seen the glass hill himself, and even conversed with the princess. "A smallish woman," he continued, "with long black hair and big eyes. I prefer my women larger, and I like a bit more meat on them. But she's very pretty if you care for the type. Delicate, you know. One of those oval faces. Young, I would say. Very young, and stolen from far Cathay. Daughter of their king and all the rest. Think you can climb a hill of glass, Sir Bradwen?"

"By Saint Joseph!" Bradwen exclaimed, and raised his sword hand to attest the oath. "I have not come this far to fail."

"Well said." The merchant smiled as the point of his dagger carried half his chop to his mouth. "I like a young man of spirit."

"And he likes you," Bradwen declared. And then, seeing that the merchant expected to be asked for a loan, "I have gold sufficient for my modest needs, you understand. I've lands, and a castle that we wrenched from the Heathen Saxon. But in the matter of tidings I am poorer than any churl. May I ask how you came to speak with the princess?"

"With little difficulty," the merchant replied, clearly relieved, "for I have been blessed with good ears and a good, loud voice. She was on the battlements, where she appears to spend a good deal of her time. The slope of the lower levels is easy, and there are crevices in the glass with bushes sprouting out of them. It becomes steeper higher up, then levels off at the top." The merchant traced the outline of a bell with his hands.

"So I was able to get pretty close," he continued. "It's not a large castle, and the walls aren't terribly high. I asked her name and so forth. She's been enchanted, she says -- a spell to replace her own tongue with ours. But' anyone who rescues her can have her. The enchanter has promised her that.

"Let's see What else? Well, the gates are open. I saw they were. She has food in there, she says, and springs of water and wine. Princess Apple Blossom's' her name, her father's King of Cathay --"

Sir Bradwen, who had heard these things before, nodded somewhat curtly.

"And she wants to be rescued," the merchant finished, not the least discomfited. "I told her I wasn't a rescuer, that I was a married man and would leave rescuing to the younger fellows, but that I would try to find a rescuer and send him to her."

"You have succeeded," Sir Bradwen declared.

"I thought so." A draught of ale washed down the rest of the chop. "Is there anything else I can tell you?"

"Yes, indeed. I assumed she was locked in her castle. You say the gates are open. Why does she not walk through them?"

The merchant shrugged. "I can but speculate, though speculation feeds me well enough. It may be that she hopes for rescue, and prefers that to death. You see, my bold and knightly friend, with each step beyond the gate the slope grows steeper. Perhaps she might take ten steps, perhaps two. I don't know. But soon she would surely lose her footing, slip, and slide. The farther she slid the faster she would go. When she struck the stones and trees at the foot "He shrugged again. "Suppose a kestrel, bold and young, were to fly full tilt into a wall of stone. For that matter, suppose that you were to ride at such a wall as you would a foe in the lists."

