

The Bowman & the Singing Reed

Once there was a young boy who loved to spend his days casting arrows in a field near his home. With each arc he would test his range and strengthen his arm, for he desired to become like his father and brothers who were all renowned hunters. They were men stout of heart and great in stature, but the young lad was yet small and thin. He earnestly aspired to be strong and brave like them, as any young boy would, and so he kept at this practice each day from morning until the setting of the sun. And every evening, then he sat in the company of his mother who delicately bound his aching limbs with a salve of willow and herbs. The boy endured the agony because he wanted to be strong and brave like his father and brothers, and he did not fear hard work or pain.

In time the boy's arms grew strong indeed. With the wind's favor his bow could send an arrow a furlong¹ or more. The men of his village thought that quite respectable for a boy of his young age. However, as much as his range improved, his aim did not. Though he enjoyed releasing his shots far and wide, he cursed himself for the task of finding and retrieving them all. While he used the boldest fletching he could obtain they still hid too well for his eyes, and he had to go home each day with only half of what he had brought out. He wished still to become like his father and brothers, so he kept at it nevertheless.

And so it happened one day that he was arching rather too close to the fen just past the village fields. One of his arrows caught a stray wind, and to his great dismay it landed near the middle of the fen with a slicing splash. He was too proud to let that one go and his cheeks burned like the midday sun with anger at himself. So down he laid his bow and quiver on a dry, old stump, and off he went after the errant bolt. Nearly half an hour passed of trudging and splashing and pushing his way through the wetland. His breeches were soaked above his knees and hot sweat rolled down his back. The bulrushes swiped at his face and fly-eating flowers nipped his bare ankles. The gnats were a general annoyance, but, unafraid of toil and discomfort, he pressed on toward his goal. After a while his pace began to slow and he despaired his chances of ever finding one right shaft among so many wrong.

Just then his ears pricked at a sound that had no place in a setting such as this: the sound of singing. It was not the voice of any man or woman, nor even a bird, but he could think of it as nothing else but singing. The song wailed high and lonesome and eerie. As strange and foreign as it was to his ears the voice enchanted him. He wondered if perhaps a mermaid or nymph had lost her way and summoned her kin with these desperate notes. With boyish delight he rushed on toward the fantasy that unfolded in his mind. Would he catch her? Would he kiss her? Would she be his bride and he a king with all the treasures of the sea? He hastened evermore as the song rang louder and louder in his ears, until he knew he was to be upon her. But when he got to where this creature should have been,

¹ 1 furlong = 660 feet

he found no one. He was completely alone in the middle of the fen with only the wind teasing the hair of his head.

The boy felt sorry for himself. He had an hour of walking now before his feet would touch dry land. He had lost his arrow. And he had found nothing to replace it or excuse the cost. He felt like a poor, sad fool. But these thoughts were interrupted when he realized that the singing had not yet stopped. It had not even quieted or slowed its meter. Indeed he knew for sure he was still right on top of where its source should be.

He looked around and saw nothing that could explain that sound until something caught his eye. He spotted one of the reeds which grew in a very unnatural way. Its shaft was a deep golden color, glinting in the afternoon sun, and its motion was much too weighty for a hollow splinter. This plant stood out singularly among all the rest and so the boy reached out his hand to take hold of it. Immediately under his touch the melody ceased and was replaced by a now palpable silence. The boy was shocked and jumped back at this surprise and as soon as his grip loosened the song returned just as loud and long and lovely as before. "Well," he thought to himself, "there's one mystery solved!" He had discovered the singer, but as he stared at the golden reed the boy wondered what to make of it. Furthermore, being the crafty boy he was, he wondered what, if anything, he might *fashion out of it*.

The boy puzzled about this for some time until a thought struck him, "Aha! *This* is my arrow! This will be my *new* arrow. This, this will be my *last* arrow!" Remembering the dreaded task that brought him out all this way he boasted, "Never again will I lose an arrow so long as I have this one. She sings to me to find her, and retrieve her I shall!" Very pleased with his wisdom he took out his knife and cut the reed below the water. As he carried his treasure back to the field and the stump the reed did not sing out as it had before. Instead it hummed quietly and contentedly upon his shoulder. This made the journey back feel very light and brief. Soon his toes felt the dry summer grass again and he retrieved his gear from the old stump. He sat himself down and quickly cut the shaft to length. He then notched it, fletched it, and set a good, sharp point in the end. Then until sundown he filled out the rest of that day casting and retrieving again and again.

Just as he had guessed, his arrow beckoned him each time and he never failed to find her. He was even surprised to find that, perhaps by some cunning of the golden reed itself, his aim was quickly improving. As the day went on not a moth or a toadstool could evade his aim. He even shot a nice, fat hare and brought it home as a gift for his mother. While he made his way home, he tucked the reed-arrow quietly into his quiver. He was now jealous of his new treasure and he did not want his father or his brothers to abuse it.

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In time the young boy came of age and grew into a handsome young man. He beamed with pride the day his father first invited him to come along with his brothers for a moonlit hunt. He rested his arms from practice that day and they all played games and joked until dusk. The family ate a hearty stew for dinner, and then with bellies full the men took up their gear and headed into the dark woods.

The young bowman found himself a suitable place to hide near a clearing that rife with hoof tracks. It took no more than an hour of watching before his quarry appeared: a handsome roebuck grazing in the moonlit meadow. The bowman smiled silently to himself as he drew back the golden arrow upon his bow. "How's this," he thought to himself, "for a first night on the hunt! There will be some mention of my name in the village after this night. That's for sure!" Calmly, silently he stalked and took aim. The bowman breathed in harmony with the deer, and at just the right moment he loosed his arrow. But to his horror, as the arrow cut through the cool night air, missing branch and leaf and trunk, homing straight to where he meant it, her siren song sent its prey running in a panic.

For a moment the bowman was stunned, staring at the arrow that trembled in the ground where the roebuck should have been. But quickly his senses returned and he was up after the animal, firing his remaining arrows furiously into the night until every last one was lost. With a bitter scowl creasing his brow he stomped back and plucked up the arrow to stop it from calling to him. When he looked up he found his brothers snickering behind a fallen log. They arose and jeered at him, "So, little brother, this is the precious secret you've been keeping from us all these years! Go home and take your magic toy with you! Why don't you play Mother a jig on your little reed flute? The deer sure don't want to hear it! Ha ha ha!" His heart sank and he hung his head. As he slinked home he heard them laughing, "Let the men keep the hunt so we don't all starve. Go home little boy!" A little later on his father's sonorous belly joined them in a great chuckle as he heard the news.

The bowman went home that night and did not join the hunt again. He did not neglect his archery, though no longer a mere boy, his daily labors afforded him less opportunity to practice. In time he forgot the simple joy that casting arrows once had given him.

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Years passed by and the young bowman grew to his full stature and took for himself a wife. She was kind of heart and he treasured her beauty. In these days he had little standing among the men of the village and his face burned with shame before his brothers. His wife, however, thought much of him, and she built up his name wherever she went. In this manner he endured the years, working the fields around the village, still undeterred by sweat or ache. He made a contented life for himself and his wife, and they soon had sons and daughters of their own. Happiness grew in their little family, warm as a fire in the hearth. This filled their simple house with the dearest of treasures.

It was in this happy time that fear and dismay crept in upon the little village like a storming cloud. Rumor had been heard of a neighboring town that lay ruined after only a season. No one remained there who could speak of what dreadful fate befell its residents. Now, as early summer came to the village, so did the object of their terror. A great huge beast emerged from the forest one night, unnatural in form and monstrous in temperament. No doubt could remain that this foul creature was what had ravaged that ghost town; and the same fate soon awaited them.

The beast stomped about on two great hooves; its tracks were like round shields in shape and size. As it danced and staggered in the fields it made gullies out of the hills and heaped up every ditch with rubble. From the sides of its head curved two deadly horns. With these it could dismount four

lancers in a single charge. From its face protruded a terrible hooked beak, which it would sharpen by slicing through oaks and ironwood. Its massive eyes glowed hot and red as blood. Covering its body was a mat of coal-black hair, long as a horse's main and thick as bear's fur. Its hands were immense and strong enough to crush an ox's head. Some of the villagers had the misfortune of witnessing just that, and the vision haunted them. From behind its body sprouted a naked tail, scaly and red. At the end of it swung a knobby club, hard and heavy as a millstone. This would make short work of any rearward attack. If such an appearance alone could not deter an assault, all these features would thwart whatever might befall it.

The monster's eyes, though, were weak in both daylight and on moonless nights. So it had the habit of sleeping in some secret place all day, and walking about only when the moon was over half-full. In this way for a fortnight each month it terrorized the village. The other half of the time they prayed against its return. This pattern went on for two months, and as the third approached all feared the final loss of crop and livestock. If this happened their winter stores would be bare and few would see spring.

The bowman's wife was huddled with grief. Their children cried at night, even when the hairy devil was nowhere to be found. The man grew to hate the shame that had enthralled him all these years. He could not stand by as the moon waxed again to let his wife and children starve. He would take up his bow and his golden arrow once when the moon was half full. Even if he could not save them, he might at least wound the monster and put an end to the reproach he had earned in youth. He kissed his wife and little ones goodbye. As the door creaked shut behind him the lamp was extinguished and the night swallowed his house.

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The bowman crouched under a stone wall as he waited for the moon to rise. He searched the cunning of his mind for some strategy to victory, but every option fell short. He would have no aid from animals on his side. Fearsome mastiffs kept guard over the village herds. No man with any sense, save their own master, would come within ten yards of their growling teeth. But at the first hint of the horned beast their hearts melted and they hid under the sheds. One of the hounds had not escaped quickly enough the month before and it disappeared in a single swallow. The hunters had tried arrows and spears against the accursed thing, but it had quick ears and the shadowy demon leaped out of the way with the first whistle in the air. No, the merest thing he could think to do was to pierce one of its great red eyes. If a wounded orb was all he could achieve that would have to be enough before everyone met their death.

The moon was late in coming, but near midnight a hideous stench came rolling from the dark forest. Earth and air trembled with the low shock of the creature's steps. It emerged from the trees with a bellow. Its eyes shown out of the blackness, two bloody spheres roving the landscape for any morsel of food. Those eyes hung in the night sky like a pair of harvest moons. The bowman was nearly entranced as he looked on. The lone protector of the village nocked his single arrow to its string and waited for his opportunity. He tracked the undulations of the giant head which seemed to keep time with the earth's own heartbeat. As one hoof slammed down in the soil followed by the next the

bowman loosed his arrow to catch the eye at the peak of its stride. The man's heart quickened and he knew for certain that he would strike his target.

But he did not. The arrow, which had hummed softly on the bow at rest, now screamed louder than ever before. It was a ghostly shriek like the undying widow of a haunted night. The titan froze in its tracks and turned to face the arrow just as it glinted off the great crook of its beak. The shaft flew straight up in the air for what seemed an hour. The bowman was certain he would be charged down now, trampled under a hoof or run through with a horn. But the creature did not move from its place. It only stared upward, fixed on the wailing bolt. As the arrow came back down it planted solidly in the ground six yards before the giant's face.

Still there was no charge, no movement at all. For nearly an hour both man and beast stood frozen in place. The bowman could not believe that this walking nightmare did nothing but stare at his singing arrow. Its great chest heaved with every slow breath; its eyes held fast on the moaning dart. The man rose slowly to his and took one cautious step over the fieldstone wall. The giant bloody eyes did not move or take any notice of him as he came into the open. One pace at a time the bowman eased in closer; he felt the creature's hot breath gust into his face and hang about him with the stench of rot. When he stood beneath the hulking figure he could just reach the height of its knee.

The bowman gripped a handful of hair from its leg, thick with oil and musk, and slid out his blade to cut it close to the skin. Even now the towering beast paid no heed, still transfixed by the unearthly song. With this token in hand he ran through the village and pounded on every door, waking each man in his house. "Up, and quickly! Bring your axe! Bring your mattock; whatever blade you can find! I'll meet you in the fields; we are delivered this night!"

The whole village assembled around the field, dumbfounded at the breathing statue. Some jeered victorious at its face; others quaked in terror. The bowman stood in the midst of their ring, guarding the arrow from any touch that might silence its eerie tone. "This simple reed shaft has given us our lives from certain death this night. In my boyhood foolishness I thought it a relief from tedious chores. As a young man it cursed me with shame. But tonight this gift from powers beyond our ken, in ways I could not foresee, has become salvation to us all. Let us not waste the gift. Bring down the beast and we are free of its dreadful curse!"

The men fastened ropes about its hands and hooves and hitched a yoke of oxen to each limb. Pulling to the four corners of the field they toppled the mountain of animal to the ground. Still it only stared on at the singing reed-arrow. Then fifteen of the strongest among them mounted upon its head and back and set to chopping through its broad neck. Through the night they worked at it until dawn showed their prize had been cleaved. The two unblinking eyes just looked on, drained pale and dead. The terror had at last come to its end!

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The villagers were shrewd and industrious. And so they demanded back from the monster's body retribution for all that it had robbed them. Its hooves they ground to dust, which they sowed on

their fields. For ten years afterward every harvest was four times the best they had ever seen before. The grinding of the hooves destroyed the millstone, but the great club from its tail gave them another, which ground for them the finest of flour for a hundred years following. No one dared eat the flesh of beast for all the evil and ruin it had wrought. So they made a great bonfire and burned meat and bone together. These ashes they spread in piles around the village lands, and neither wolf nor thief was seen in that precinct for fifty years. With its hair they thatched every roof in the village and not a house saw a leak for twenty years. And upon its tanned hide was painted a mural to commemorate the victory of their patron hero in the meeting hall. The monstrous head too was mounted within the hall above the chief seat as a tribute to the bowman who had saved his village. In the following generations no ill word was ever spoken of him again. But, for his part, the bowman was happiest to go back home and see his family safe. And his children had great joy in casting their father's arrow for many years to come.

The End