
A COMB FOR MY LADY

Once upon time, in a land now known as Great Britain, there lived a brave knight and a fair lady who shared a passion for adventure. They also shared a great love and respect for their Christian beliefs; and they fully embraced their roles in the feudal society they lived within. This made them always put the good of others before their own. They would pass their love for honor and duty down to their daughter, along with a small gift that represented their love for each other: A unique comb for Lady Aetheling that was purchased by Lord Aetheling and presented to her on their wedding day.

I am that comb. I am of French origin and made of ivory that my Master, Lord Aetheling obtained during one of his expeditions to France. It was very rare that he would give such a secular gift, but he wanted something that was as beautiful and delicate as his bride; something that would reflect his deep love for her and be a constant reminder of their unwavering bond. A bond that had been strengthened by their love, honor for each other and faith. My Lord understood the precious balance between having the faith and love of a beautiful woman versus the faith and love dictated by Christianity. He chose me to say the things he would not be able to say to her during his absence. He also chose me because I am adorned by a relief carved into ivory called “*Lovers in the Garden*,”¹ which seemed to be fitting for his intended. The relief is a classical style motif, carved by hand, depicting scenes of lovers in three various embraces expressing their love and devotion to the other. A fitting gift that declared my Master’s undying love for his new bride. Especially since Lord Aetheling had orders to command and lead the Englishmen from his village to the First Crusade at Antioch. These were direct orders of the emperor from Constantinople. His bravery as a young knight had paid off, and he along with his new wife were duty-bound by the feudal society to fight for Christianity.

Although the young knight felt great sadness for his impending departure from his new bride and his majestic estate, he was comforted with knowing they were both devoted to their faith and that their love for each other would bring them some comfort during their separation. He always took pleasure in thinking about her magnificent hair. He made his departure for the Crusade not knowing that his bride was pregnant with their child. He joined his king and others to form a fleet marching towards the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem motivated by the passionate



¹This is not a historically accurate image, it is simply the inspiration for this tale, the relief carved into the comb is called: *Lovers in a Garden*, Paris, Ivory, ca. 14th Century, Anonymous, currently at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

argument made by Urban II, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me.”² It was this argument that reminded him of his duty, as he began his travels he recall watching his new wife sew a red cross on the chest of his uniform above his new crest which resulted from the merging of his family’s crest with his wife’s family. He did not overlook the symbolism that dictated that his love for God must always be above his love for family. No matter how great his love for his wife was, he knew that he had to follow his faith into battle. He had hoped that the little ivory comb he had given her would be a constant reminder and a message of his eternal love and devotion. As he sat atop of the bluff he surveyed all that he was leaving behind.

Along with his great estate, he left her with her second most cherished gift an ivory comb which she had worn proudly in her hair on her wedding day and had planned to not wear again until the day of his triumphant return. Lady Aetheling wondered at the enormity of the castle and wondered how she would make it without him in his home. Although she would now be living in the castle without him, she would never be alone. She now had his kingdom to manage and his child to raise. As she retired to the keep, her thoughts and prayers were for him. She constantly envisioned seeing him as he had ridden off sitting proudly above his steed at the top of the bluff waving the flag that displayed the crest of their new combined families. She made a mental note to herself to have the clergy meet her in the chapel so she can pray for her husband’s safe journey and return. She said a silent prayer to God that she would faithfully honor His will. From that moment on, she waited and waited for her husband’s return as their daughter grew into a beautiful strong young woman who had watched her mother wither from the weight of her love and the strength of her faith as she waited for her father’s return.

She watched her beautiful daughter grow into a strong beautiful woman galloping through their majestic countryside slaying imaginary dragons. Her daughter had the same spirit as her father, headstrong, brave and with a sense of adventure. She was the feminine personification of her father, noble, brave and adventurous. She inherited her mother’s great beauty and magnificent hair but all else was from her father. The daughter swore never to repeat the folly of her mother. However once her mother told her that she had not withered, but instead had chosen to take comfort in knowing her husband had been a brave good man who had gone off to fight an honorable war, she had a change of heart. She was very proud of him especially since he had also left her with such splendid tokens of his love a beautiful daughter and an enchanting ivory comb.

On her daughter’s wedding day, her mother placed the comb strategically in her daughter’s hair and as she did so the great lady told her daughter of the love lost for the greater good and the beautiful unique gift that had become a symbol of their love. The daughter thanked her mother and swore she would always cherish it. Proudly she wore the comb her father had given her mother. She wore it as though it was the red cross that her mother had sewn on her father’s Crusader’s uniform. Her mother made her promise that she would share the

² Jaroslav Folda, "The Art of the Crusaders in the Holy Land 1098–1187. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

story as she passed it along to her daughter. And so it was that I became a part of the tradition that represented love, family and honor.

Generation after generation, I adorned the head of the most courageous women; women who were born to be queens and ruled their lives like kings. Every photograph since the



invention of the camera showed me in the hair of my many mistresses. They stared boldly into the camera's eye daring the world to mistake their kindness for weakness. I was no longer just a ceremonial object, I was often worn for special occasions or when my

mistresses wanted to demonstrate familial bond and personal strength. For hundreds of years and countless generations I was a family heirloom, acknowledged by others as representing the strength of spiritual faith, great family honor, love, nobility and beauty.

For centuries, I had been proudly displayed in the luxurious manes of many English and American women. I was worn in the hair of one of my mistresses as she crossed the ocean, leaving behind her English home that was being torn apart by the second great world war. She not only brought me along, she also brought the story of the love between the brave Crusader and the beautiful lady he left behind. She told this story to her daughter, born in America, and that story was told to her daughter's daughter, so on and so on until my last mistress. She had also grown up hearing this wonderful tale and counting down the days until she had arrived at womanhood, which was now the only criteria for inheriting the comb. It was grandly presented to her on her 21st birthday. She sat at her vanity and placed it in her hair as though it was a crown. She wore me with such great honor and care, while she waited for the magic that had touched all those before her to provide her the promised salvation.

Many years would pass before it occurred to her that she had waited her entire life for some brave faithful phantom knight to bring purpose into her life. That she had withered away like her ancestor, Lady Atheling, waiting on love. And like her great, great, great, great and so on, great grandmother, she had been neither sad nor lonely. Her life had been enchanting. And although her body had recently been physically overtaken by disease, her only sorrow was that she had no daughter to give this beautiful comb to or to tell the story of the great love that was lost in honor of the Crusade.

In her final moments, she cradled me close to her heart while allowing her tears for her unconceived daughter to anoint me. In the year of our Lord 2010 my Mistress was laid to rest, leaving behind no children. She left no strong-willed girls with long locks blowing in the wind as they galloped through the countryside slaying imaginary dragons. Nor anyone who was eagerly awaiting the gift of the comb to wear in their hair. In the end, my 21st century Mistress had been unable to affix me to her hair since she had been ill, grown frail from treatments, and disheartened from watching her hair fall to the floor like feathers plucked from a chicken. As she marched towards her final sunset, she felt only a mild tinge of sadness that she had not found

a man to love her, but more so, that she had all but lost her great beauty. At first she felt like she had not truly experienced what I, the comb, most represented, family honor, great love, or the strength that comes from having undying faith. Luckily, before her demise, she realized differently. The individual tending to her estate found her with the most peaceful smile on her face and with me in her hand. She was still clutching the comb when she realized in her last breath that she always had everything she ever needed. The clarity of death, made her see that she always had the one thing that kept her strong and faithful. The comb had been a cherished family heirloom and had survived for centuries before her loving mother had given it to her. She realized that the many generations that had passed the comb down to her had been the great love of her life.

It was always the comb that represented all that she cherished most, the love of family and God. As she closed her eyes she felt herself riding a beautiful stallion up the bluff with the comb in her long beautiful hair flowing in the breeze created by the galloping horse. She smiled enthusiastically as she rode vigorously towards the majestic castle that sat on the highest peak of the Aetheling estate. That's where her mother, grandmother and many ancestors were waiting for her. She could even see Lord and Lady Aetheling waiving at her. Although she passed away all alone, as she closed her eyes she knew she was going home.

My Lady passed away having had no heirs, ironically, Lord Aetheling died not knowing he had an heir or knowing that the comb he purchased would be such a magnificent gift and an important family heirloom. He did not know that the comb would historically solidify his family's legacy even more so than his life as a heroic soldier. It would be worn with the same intense conviction as he wore his Crusader's cross or his family's crest. He did not know that the fancy little secular trinket would be passed from generation to generation and worn as a symbol of love, honor and faith. Nor did he know that the last Aetheling heir would also die alone fighting a proverbial battle. Lord Aetheling died bravely alone on the battlefield sharing the same thought of going home to the Aetheling estate as did all of Aetheling heirs after him. This final thought brought them all peace and comfort as they drifted gently into the eternal night.