

The Kite

My father, Meriden Moret, returned from the East with fantastic tales of gilded palaces, giant two-headed animals, fountains of youth and magic liquors. And he bore gifts. Dresses of the finest silk and black pearl necklaces on silver chains for my mother and sister and a mystery in a box for me. I ran to the back of our house to my bed, fell to my knees and tore the box apart. I didn't know what I was looking at. It looked like a rolled up banner. As I reached my hand toward it. My father came up behind me and grabbed my wrist. "Not now," he said. "It's a kite. A flying kite. Tomorrow I will show you how it works. Don't tell anyone." I closed the box and slid it under my bed.

The next morning the sheriff's posse raided our village. Deputies in armor blocked the streets on massive steeds. Foot soldiers took food from the shops and the inn, tools from the smithy and carpenter and cows, chickens and horses. They loaded their booty in wagons as crossbowmen stood guard. The sheriff climbed atop his carriage. His men herded us into the circle around him. Two soldiers dragged Franz, our shoemaker from his house and threw him on the ground in front of the sheriff's carriage. "Lord Rankin thanks you for the monthly tribute, but not every one of you has filled his quota," the sheriff yelled, his words dripping with insincerity.

"Franz has only 15 pairs of shoes when we asked for 25. He doesn't appreciate our protection, our benevolence." The sheriff's men whipped Franz 10 times for each pair of shoes he was short. The sheriff walked to our house, which was across the green, and pointed at the front door without a word. Soldiers bullied their way in, pulled my father out, wrapped him in chains

and threw him into a carriage cage in the middle of the green. My mother ran after him, but two of the sheriff's men held her back and she fell to her knees and screamed "Why, why?"

"Your husband is a traitor," the sheriff said. Somehow word of the silk and pearls had reached the city. They said my father was arrested for forbidden travel to the East. The sheriff's men ripped the necklaces from my sister's and mother's necks and made them give up their silk dresses. The sheriff must not have known about the kite and it stayed hidden away under my bed.

The next day Mr. Milleter, the village innkeeper, called at our door. Though he was my father's friend and lived across the green, I hadn't seen him in several months. It was said he had been to the East. I asked him if he had. He didn't answer. I invited him in. He risked a furtive glance over each shoulder, stepped inside and closed the door.

He took in my puzzled look and said. "Did your father bring anything? Something for you, a curious boy? You can tell me. Trust me."

"He did," I said. "My father said it's a kite, a flying kite."

"Where is it?" he asked

"Under my bed. Is it a toy? Can it really fly?" I asked.

"It does fly, but, hopefully, it's not just a toy. Bring it. I'll show you."

We hiked the mountain switchbacks on the well worn trail stopping halfway up at the meadow where the priests led the prayers and sacrificed a goat to the sun for the equinox. One solitary oak stood in the center of the meadow its branches dipping and flapping in the wind. With our backs to the mountain, we looked over a vista of waving wheat and climbing beans lining the winding roads to the seven wooded villages in the river dells of Lord Rankin's domain.

At the horizon the spire on the Lord's castle tower sparkled in the sun over the top of the city's buildings.

Mr. Milleter opened the package. The kite was a diamond shaped fabric. It was fixed to a frame of a light-weight yet strong wood of a type I had never seen. The kite was emblazoned with art: A large red eye over black cross. Mr. Milleter told me to hold the kite high above my head and run until it tugged. "Until it wants to fly," were his words.

Mr. Milleter held the kite's tether ball letting it unravel as I ran. When the kite tugged I let go and it soared so quickly and strongly it pulled Mr. Milleter along. He struggled to control it. I ran to help him. He ran a stick through the tether ball for a hold and we regained control. Soon the kite had taken all the tether and was straining for more. "That's 150 feet," Mr Milleter yelled through the wind. We both laughed. I grabbed the stick myself and ran around the meadow watching the kite make a giant circle. No matter how I turned, the red eye seemed to point directly at the castle spire. We flew the kite until dusk. When we tried to bring the kite down it fought us even though the wind was diminishing, at least where we stood it was. The kite must have found a steady current to ride.

"Let's tie it to the tree," said Mr. Milleter "and come back tomorrow."

We tied the tether to the lowest, longest branch. The next morning the kite had not moved. It was still straining at the tether, though the air was calm. Mr. Milleter pulled on the tether, it did not move. Together then, one, two, three, pull, but it didn't budge. Mr. Milleter went back to his house and got his glass. He looked and said. "By God, it's calm up there, too. Its tail is hanging limp."

We heard hoofbeats and looking over the edge of the clearing we could see a cloud of dust and dirt on the switchbacks of the path. The sheriff's posse. Mr. Milleter and I ran into the woods at the edge of the clearing. The woods were dense. Easy to hide and watch.

The sheriff signaled one of his men to bring down the kite. He grabbed and pulled the tether until his gloves ripped and the tether cut off his hand. As the sheriff's man rolled on the ground gripping his bloody stump, the sheriff ordered the strongest horse to the front and tied a rope around the tether and hooked it on a saddle horn. The rider whipped the horse and it ran. But when the slack ran out the tether didn't budge. The horse reared up and fell back dumping the rider who landed on his head and broke his neck. The sheriff rode up to the tree, pulled his sword and swung it at the tether. The tether bowed a bit, then snapped back and catapulted the sword out of the sheriff's hand. The sword spun into one of his men, pierced his armour and tore his heart out through his back

The sheriff signaled retreat and the posse hurried away down the switchbacks leaving the dead and wounded. Mr. Milleter and I helped the man who had lost his hand, wrapping his arm with my coat. The others were dead. We took him to the inn and got him settled in a room. Mrs. Milleter dressed the soldier's wound and fed him. He drank two pints of mead. He told her his name was Langadash.

Mr. Milleter and I vowed silence to each other and I went home. The next morning I was awakened by Mother's yells from the yard where she was weeding. "What's that? Up in the sky over the hill?"

The villagers saw the kite, too, and the next day the mayor led a party to investigate. Mr. Milleter and I went along with the injured soldier. At the clearing the mayor walked up to the tree

and reached for the tether. Mr. Milleter was about to shout a warning, but before he could a spark flew from the tree and knocked the mayor to the ground.

He stood, unhurt, and looked up. "Does anyone have a glass," he said. Mr. Milleter came forward. The mayor looked through the glass and saw that kite rode the wind and that when the wind shifted, the kite turned so the eye gazed steadily at the castle spire.

"It's a device of the devil himself," called one villager.

There were rousing rounds of "Yes, it must be" and "Bring it down."

"No, wait," Mr Milleter said. "See where it stares. It's a sign. It's not of the devil. It shows us the devil." The glass was passed around.

We heard the sounds of hundreds of hoofbeats and wagon wheels churning. A cloud of dust enveloped the clearing as Lord Rankin himself led a division of his army to encircle us and the tree. Lord Rankin alighted from his coach. His personal guard, a monstrous man eight feet tall, with arms like dragon's legs, followed him, carrying the royal axe forged of the finest steel.

The Lord climbed on a horse near the tree and addressed the villagers. "This abomination will not stand. You need protection from it."

He pointed at his guard and said, "Cut down the tree."

The giant walked to the tree, took a firm stance, spat on his gloves, and with a mighty swing hit the tree. The sound was not a crack, but a mournful groan as the axe flipped and bounced back splitting the giant's head down to his neck, spraying brain matter into Lord Rankin's face. When the giant fell the ground shook. The soldiers' horses snorted, reared back and turned wanting to flee. The soldiers strained to hold their leads. Rankin climbed down from the horse and his footman ran to him and wiped his face with a cloth.

“The gods are calling for a holocaust. A sacrifice,” Lord Rankin said.

Rankin ordered two soldiers to bring a barrel of oil to the base of the tree. When they refused, he ordered them killed by the bow by his inner guard. Two others were ordered and brought the barrel to the tree. The trunk was soaked with oil. Two other soldiers dragged a chained man from a wagon. My father. They chained him to the tree and soaked him with the rest of the oil. I opened my mouth to protest. I stepped forward, but Milleter stopped me. His grip firm.

My mother sobbed and covered her eyes as the torch was touched to my father. But the oil did not light. The flame raced back along the torch and up the arm of the soldier. He dropped the torch and ran away screaming as flames engulfed him.

Milleter whispered something to Langadash, the soldier who had lost his hand. Langadash stepped from the crowd and approached the tree. “Stop him,” the Lord commanded, but no one moved.

Langadash touched the tree with his good hand. Raising his arm he pointed his stump toward the kite. The kite turned its eye to the sun absorbing its power, turned and shot a beam of yellow light onto the stump. The skin of the stump bubbled and boiled, but the soldier did not cry out. Bumps appeared and became finger tips. The soldier turned his arm as full fingers, a hand and wrist grew before our eyes. Looking down at my father Langadash pointed his new finger at Rankin and said, “Unchain him.” Village men fell to their knees and bowed before the sight. Women hugged and wept. Children fainted. Rankin leapt out of the way as his coach exploded in a ball of fire shot from the kite.

Rankin froze, staring in utter astonishment. The cavalrymen turned their steeds and sped away. Rankin yelled “unchain him” and his inner guard released my father. Rankin and his men leapt into the prison wagon where my father had been kept as his footmen fought with the reins of the wagon’s spooked team. The wagon careened down the switchback and away toward the city.

My father embraced my mother, sister and me, and Mr. Milleter. The two friends pounded each other on their backs. As we all hiked back to the village, Mr. Milleter and my father walked side-by-side and talked, though I couldn’t hear them.

Within a few days stories of the miraculous flying kite spread to the seven villages in Rankin’s county and caravans of pilgrims came to see the tree and get closer to the kite. Purveyors from our village sold bread, sausages, wine and mead. Families brought their blind, their crippled, their lepers and touched them to the tree. Sores receded, a blind man said he saw light and a boy with deadened legs took a few halting steps. When Langadash appeared the pilgrims pulled on his cloak and knelt before him. Some kissed his feet. They vaulted him on top of the crowd and carried him around the tree chanting his name and “lead us,” “lead us.”

In pitched battles, peasants armed with pitchforks and hoes would be slaughtered by soldiers armed with crossbows and swords, and many were slaughtered, but even more of the Lord’s soldiers were slaughtered, burned alive by streaks of fire from the Eye of the Kite. The soldiers learned to retreat when the sun was high and force the fight at dawn or dusk or under grey clouds, when the Eye’s power waned. But even weakened the Eye drove the soldiers back toward the city.

By a month the army, with its rear at the city moat, was hungry and surrounded except for a narrow mountain pass behind the city, where food and reinforcements trickled in from Lord Billet's County. The pass, with hills, forest and the city between it and the meadow on the mountain was out of the kite's range. The enemy held the pass with ferocity.

While Langadash planned an assault on the pass, the smithies from our villages forged swords and armor. The carpenters built bows, the women made arrows. My father tended the horses.

Mr. Milleter and I worked as healers at the meadow. One by one we brought our wounded to touch the tree. Many of them claimed to be healed and asked to go back to the front.

One morning I noticed the tether had slackened. I took it in my hand and it moved. I sent a messenger to get Langadash. When he arrived, he pulled on the tether. It moved. He untied it from the tree and fixed it on his saddle horn.

As we rode back to the front with Landadash pulling the kite, the sun was high and hot. The Eye glowed red and stared at the castle spire.