

Conversation Pieces
Volume 35

The Queen, the Cambion,
and Seven Others

by
Richard Bowes





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For Lee and Peter

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Illustration by Arthur Rackham for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare, 1908

Myth is the sea on which the Fantasy story floats.
Legend is the wind that drives it.
Its place of birth is the Fairy Tale.



Illustration by Arthur Rackham for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare, 1908

Seven Smiles and Seven Frowns

1.

Each time I find a new apprentice in these times of trouble I remember being a girl of twelve, getting close to thirteen. The other lads and maidens my age were already starting to pair off. But I was still taking my little brother and sister to hear the Witch of the Forest of Avalon tell stories on her porch on summer evenings. The old tales always held a fascination for me.

Our town was a peaceful one on the edge of the forest. In those days Bertrade was the Witch. Feet or a farm wagon are the only way ordinary people around here travel, and the Witch lived within walking distance. We'd gather in her yard in front of the huge tree.

The fine house was of wood and stone and even had glass windows, rare enough to seem like magic to me. The porch was laid out on the roots, and the windows looked out of the trunk. The front door would open, and the Witch, dressed not unlike our mothers but carrying a long, twisted grey stick, would appear and say, "Welcome to the Oak of Avalon." Then we'd all come up on the porch where lemonade and ginger cookies

would suddenly appear on a table. The light ebbed as the telling progressed. At the story's end Bertrade would stand and tell us to hurry home, and we'd run barefoot through the gathering dark.

She told the old tales, ones I'd heard many times: the brother and sister lost in the forest, the dancing daughters, the scullery maid who's really a princess, the frightened dragon, and the forgetful witch. Bertrade always described that one as "an unusual wicked witch."

So familiar were those stories and so fine were her tellings that I mostly floated on their surfaces, like you do hearing a favorite song.

But she also told unusual ones. Especially late in the summer when dusk came earlier and the air might have a crisp tang. Some of these were rare, and a few were brand new to me. So they caught my full attention, made me wonder.

One evening right at the start she said, "This is a story that the Fairies tell." We'd heard many of these, and they were always about Fairies: wise Fairy godmothers, tricky but wonderful gifts, brave princes and beautiful princesses disguised as pigs and toads.

She looked directly at me before announcing the name of a story I'd never heard. "Seven Smiles and Six Frowns," she said. Then she started.

"One fine morning in early May, into a forest, much like the one in which we find ourselves, came Prince Alaric, eldest son of the King Who Rules.

"He rode a horse with wings and wore a crown, a cape, gloves, a sword, fine britches that fit into his boots. Prince Alaric was handsome and well-liked by all. He

had about him a questing spirit and love of everything that was new and unknown.

“His parents, anxious to make a match, invited every princess in the neighborhood, each lovelier than the next, to balls and fêtes. But Alaric was satisfied with none of them.

“On the particular day of this story I tell, Prince Alaric was separated from his companions and found himself alone and deep in woods where he had never traveled before. He had no fear because the Fairy Folk had loved him since he was a child and had given him all manner of presents.

“Bellephron the winged horse, gift of the Lord of Day, would carry him above the trees. The cloak, a gift of the Lady of Night would make him invisible to his enemies. The ring given him by the Vizier of Wisdom enabled him to pass through solid walls. The sword from the Knight of Wands would smash the weapons of any foes. The boots from the Messenger of the Winds would carry him a thousand leagues in a single hour. The belt and britches from the Shining Maiden made him stronger than any hundred men.

“But the crown from the King Who Rules was the greatest gift of all. For that permitted him to see the minds of others.”

Listening to “Seven Smiles” made me concentrate, question the list of what the prince wore. Like all fairy stories, this took place in a distant past. I’d never heard of the Shining Maiden or the Lord of the Day. But the King Beneath the Hill was and is the King Who Rules us.

I thought about the growing dusk, the chirping of birds settling down for the night, the smell of the wood

around me, the ginger cookies I could still taste, and the feel of the floorboards on my feet.

I realized the Witch had paused, and when I glanced up, she was looking my way, making sure she had my attention before starting again.

“As he rode through this woods Prince Alaric saw the most beautiful maiden he had ever seen standing in the forest clad only in a simple dress and seeming to be part of the leaves and trees.”

And I imagined a woman standing in a fine green shift, barefoot. She was tall, and blended into the trees, and looked Alaric right in the eye. Sure now that I was with her, Bertrade continued.

“Then Alaric smiled the smile that had won the heart of each and every princess. But the Maiden only frowned the frown given her by the Nixie of the Silver Pond and said, ‘Your horse gives me much displeasure.’

“So the prince dismounted, and when he did, the winged horse disappeared. Alaric smiled again but the maiden only frowned the frown she had learned from the Dryad of the Farthest Moors.

“‘Your cloak gives me much displeasure,’ she said. Alaric kept his smile, but unfastened the gold chain. The cloak, the gift of the Lady of the Night, fell to the ground and disappeared.

“The prince smiled but the Maiden said. ‘Your ring gives me much displeasure,’ and the Vizier of Wisdom’s gift disappeared in the dirt of the road.

“So it went with the Prince smiling and the Maiden frowning the frown given her by the Gryphon of the Tall Mountain and saying, ‘Your sword gives me much

displeasure.’ The Prince let the gift of the Knight of Wands fall to the ground and disappear.

“Still he smiled and the Maiden showed him the frown given her by the Sybil of the Iron Throne and said, ‘Your boots give me much displeasure.’ He stripped off the gift of the Messenger of the Winds, and they too disappeared and he stood barefoot.

“Thus it was that Prince Alaric smiled, and the Maiden only frowned her frown from the Harvest Queen and said, ‘Your belt and britches give me great displeasure.’ And he unbuckled the belt, stepped out of the britches and they disappeared.”

We all giggled at the idea. But the Witch just paused then said, “At last he stood in just his crown and a simple shirt. Before the maiden could tell him the crown gave her great displeasure, he took it off. And without even using it to read the Maiden’s mind he put the gift of the King Who Rules on the ground where it too disappeared.

“Then with no more to give than the poorest of the poor, Alaric smiled at the Maiden with all his love.

“And the Maiden was the Princess Gerathea of Astolot kept under a spell by the Witch of the Forest, one of those unusual wicked Witches. The spell would last until she found a man who would give up his crown for her. She had no more frowns left. Instead she smiled at the prince with the same love he had shown her.

“Then all the gifts Alaric had surrendered reappeared. The Prince lifted the Maiden up before him on his winged horse and together they flew back to the palace where they announced their betrothal and were wed amid their parents’ blessing and the people’s rejoicing.”

2.

The ending gave me displeasure just as I knew it must have given Gerathea. As the younger children thanked Bertrade and got up to go home in the gathering darkness, the Witch of Avalon beckoned me close to her.

“If you were to come tomorrow evening you might well hear a tale you like better.” I nodded, wide-eyed, and she added. “Tell no one but your parents.”

And then because it was dark with a chill in the air and because the youngest children were a little afraid, the Witch of Avalon waved the long, gray stick she carried and a ball of fire appeared. It floated in the air in front of us on our way home and stopped at each gate until the children from that house were indoors.

Our house was last. I waited until my brother and sister were in bed before I told my parents what Bertrade told me. My father looked unsure, and my mother looked a bit sad, but both nodded agreement like they had known this would happen.

My parents were indulgent, never pressed me to behave like the other girls or asked what I was going to do. Both respected the old ways and must have known I wasn't made for a life in this town: marrying a shopkeeper or a farmer and raising a family. I was the kind of child who loved the old ways, listened to grandparents tell stories their grandparents had told them about the wonders in the days before the coming of the King Beneath the Hill. The King's magic was very strong, and he could read a thousand minds at once.

Witches were part of those days. The King crushed Sphinx and Sybil, Giant and Water God. But most witches, though some were caught and burned, evaded

destruction through cunning and luck, lived quietly, and were ignored by the authorities.

But though Fey don't die, they do fade away eventually. So it was said to be with the King Beneath the Hill. He reigned but did not rule. His palace and the wondrous city of Maxee where he lived were far away. The Crown Prince was gone, and the other sons were known to be quarreling about the succession and too busy to care about us.

People went to Bertrade when they were sick or in trouble. If anyone ruled the town, it was the Witch. If she wished to see me, my parents would not refuse. So the next evening, wearing a wool sweater as well as my shift, I went alone down the path to the Oak of Avalon. The Witch sat alone on the porch, and there was tea and cake.

Before she started, she said, "I've never told this version of the story. I only heard it once and that was from my mother who was Witch of Avalon before me.

"Seven Frowns and Seven Smiles," she said—and paused—then began.

"Not many years after the invaders entered this land, Prince Alaric, the son of the King Who Rules, rode into the Forest of Avalon as though it was his. He was handsome and well liked among his kind and thought very well of himself.

"His parents had invited every princess, each lovelier than the next, to balls and fêtes. But Alaric was satisfied with none of them, because even the best was not good enough.

"Though he found himself alone and deep in a woods, Alaric had no fear. For the Fairy Lords and Ladies had given him at birth all manner of presents."

Again they all got listed: Bellephron the winged horse, the cape, the ring, the sword, the belt and britches, the boots. As before the list ended with: "But the crown from the King Who Rules was the greatest gift of all. For that permitted him to see the minds of others.

"On this bright morning a beautiful maiden watched the Prince's passage. But he couldn't see her for she was dressed in robes of green spider silk and blended right into the trees. She carried a long twisted gray stick.

"When she stepped onto the path and looked Alaric right in the eye, it was more an ambush than an encounter."

I listened to the story, felt it blend into the sounds of birds chirping at twilight, leaves whispering, something moving in the grass.

"Alaric smiled for the maiden the smile that won the heart of each and every princess. But this was Gerathea, Daughter of the Witch Queen, and she had heard of Alaric.

"Gerathea answered his smile with a frown and threw the curse given her by the Nixie of the Silver Pond who had lost her underwater home to the invaders.

"Alaric was startled when the horse disappeared from under him before he could fly away. But he landed on his feet and smiled again. Gerathea frowned and hurled the curse of the Dryad of the Farthest Moors whose lands had been taken by the Fey King.

"Alaric's robe disappeared before he could make himself invisible. The mourning chant of the Troll King took his ring before he noticed. His smile was hard as he reached for his sword. Her frown and the curse of the

Gryphon of The Tall Mountain, uttered as he fell to his death, took sword and scabbard.

“Alaric’s smile faltered as he moved towards Gerathea. But a frown and the dying prophecy of the Sybil of the Iron Throne took his boots before he could reach her. The last prayer of the Harvest Queen deprived him of belt and britches.

“On his head was the crown given him by his father the King Who Rules. Before he could go into Gerathea’s mind, she uttered a spell of her own creation. She stepped forward with the twisted gray stick that was the wand given to her by her mother the Queen of Witches.

“Before he could go into her mind, she uttered a curse of her own making and knocked the crown from his head.

“Alaric stood helpless with nothing but a shirt to his name like the poorest of the poor.

“She struck him on his chest. The shirt fell away and he shrank back into a child, crying and trying to cover himself. Gerathea took his hand and led him deep into the woods. There he remains to this day.”

I liked this version much better than the last. And there was the surprise, in fact a shock, at the end. It was said The King Beneath the Hill’s own son, the crown prince, had been lost many years ago, and never found.

Bertrade looked at my face and knew all I was thinking. She smiled, which I’d not seen her do.

“Would you like to learn more?”

“Will I be able to do things like Gerathea?”

“Unlikely I’m afraid!” She smiled again. “It will be hard; harder than school. And you will live here.” As she

spoke an owl flew down and landed on her shoulder. “Minerva, my night companion,” she said.

“My mother and father...”

“We will talk to them tonight.” She rose and held out her hand. The owl watched as I grasped it. But then she looked away as if she was already used to me.

3.

That night and the revelations that followed are with me whenever there is a girl or even a boy who doesn’t stop coming to my tellings when all others their age do. I haven’t married and have no children. But the apprentices when they appear every few years are a substitute.

Nevya the current one is almost ready to go on her own to a town deep in the heart of the Forest. Though I’ve inherited the title of Witch of Avalon, there are quite a few of us in these woods. Almost every town and large village throughout the kingdom has one. We have spent our time well.

Now it’s a boy, Diccon, age twelve who comes to hear me tell the tales. He’s hounded by the other children. His father calls him worthless. If Diccon wishes, I will take him as an apprentice though it breaks tradition. In the coming crisis a boy may prove very useful.

I’ve been Witch of Avalon since Bertrade departed. Before she grew weary of this life, she transformed herself into an owl and flew away one night at harvest time. She and her familiar, Minerva, seemed to sail directly into the huge moon that filled the sky and disappear.

In memory our childhoods are times of wonder and the present is poor and mean. Truly, though my childhood was far better.

Now people are robbed on the roads. Now men are hanged for poaching on what was always public land, and farms are seized for taxes on a whim. My brother is mayor of my home town. People, especially the young, are angry and want to fight. He grows old with worry.

Fey eventually pass into a twilight world. The King Beneath the Hill by all reports is more in that world than not. And there is no clear Heir since the Crown Prince disappeared centuries ago. The struggle for succession among the brother princes entails great expense. The payment comes from the people.

In these last weeks of summer I told the story of the Smiles and Frowns as the Fey once told it. And I promised to tell it the next week as the Witches now tell it. For that telling, adults, mainly women, came and stood behind their children. They snickered at the plight of Alaric, applauded Gerathea, went home, and as I thought they would, talked about what they'd heard.

I promised then that tonight I would tell the story as people will tell it in years to come. The word has spread. This time many men young and old stand with the women. A tale should not only entertain but teach. Learning this one did that for me. Nevya sits with Diccon. I've talked to his father, and the boy will now stay with me. The crowd arranges itself around the porch, and I begin:

Seven Wrongs and Seven Princes

Once there was a King Who Ruled and had great power and had seven sons. He loved them all and gave each a gift. To one a winged horse, to another a cloak of invisibility, to the third a ring that let him pass through walls, to the fourth a sword that could smash any weapon, to the fifth boots that carried one a thousand leagues, to the sixth a belt and britches of power that made him stronger than a hundred men. But he loved the eldest, Prince Alaric, the most and gave him a crown with which he could see into others' minds.

When one day the prince disappeared while hunting, the king searched for him for a year and a day, knew no happiness when he couldn't be found, and lost all interest in ruling. The brothers guessed and even hoped Alaric would never return. Each thought he would be king, and they fought with each other and plotted against each other.

The country fell into ruin. Neighboring kings invaded and burned villages and towns, bandits ruled the roads, pirates raided the fishing fleets, farmers couldn't plant their crops, thieves made off with the cattle and sheep. And still the king mourned and the brothers fought.

Then one day a solitary figure, a man in the robes of a traveling scholar, rode toward the castle on an old and tired horse. On his head he wore a crown. His brothers saw the figure from the castle walls and guessed who he was.

The brother who had been given a flying horse leapt on its back and flew at the traveler. As he swooped in the other man smiled a tired sad smile and put into his brother's mind the anger and despair of woodcutters whose forest had been burned. The flying horse disappeared, and the brother fell bottom first into a puddle.

Children in the audience clap their hands. Their parents nod approval.

The traveler continued on and the next brother wrapped himself in the cloak of invisibility. He was shown peddlers robbed and murdered on the royal highway. His cape disappeared, and he was too much a coward to act openly.

The brother with the ring saw miners trapped underground and smashed his face into a wall he tried to walk through. The brother with the sword found himself empty-handed when fishing boats smashing on the rocks appeared in his head.

The one with the magic boots saw unpaid soldiers starving and ended up barefoot. Then the one with belt and britches saw farmers with burned crops and found himself bare-assed.

The audience enjoys this, laughing and applauding.

Finally the eldest son, Prince Alaric, for it was he, entered the castle, climbed the stairs, and discovered his father alone in the throne room. The old man looked up amazed and rose, asking his son where he had been and what had happened to

him. His crown still enabled him to see into others' minds.

He saw how his son had decided to lose his princely raiment and go through the kingdom finding out how the people lived and what they thought. When the father saw the near ruin to which the land was reduced, he wept and begged the son to take his crown and rule the country.

Then all his brothers swore allegiance. Alaric married a wise and beautiful woman he had met in his travels, ruled justly and well. The kingdom recovered and became prosperous once again.

People thank me for the tale. I tell them it isn't mine but was given to me in bits and pieces by visiting witches. Tales like this one, I tell them, are not truth or prophecy. They are made up of our fears and hopes. Witches have told this story in many places.

I don't tell them the stories about Prince Alaric, which we Witches share with no one else. Nevya accompanies the visitors back to town and answers questions about what they've just heard.

4.

Only Diccon and I remain. I put my hand on his shoulder and lead him to where Reynard my familiar sits in the shadows. The fox allows himself to be patted, which says much in the boy's favor. No one would suspect a male of being a Witch, and Diccon is eager to learn.

So I bring him to the other side of the Oak to a small locked hut and tell him what he's about to see. Diccon

is wide-eyed. I open the door, cause light to shine, and show him what Bertrade showed me on my first night in Avalon. A pale figure, a man in a shirt, Prince Alaric under heavy enchantment stares wide-eyed at Diccon, who stares back.

The Prince was ambushed in this forest long before I or Bertrade or her mother was born. For the generations since he was captured we Sisters have passed him around, taking him to parts of his kingdom he would never have visited, showing him subjects he would never have seen otherwise. I always try to make sure he's here in Avalon when a new apprentice comes to me.

Originally he was kept on the move to prevent his being recaptured. I doubt if anyone is looking for him now. These days, his return would be a thunderbolt that would upset far too many of his brothers' plans.

He always begs to be free, says he's learned about the sorrows and hardships in the land. He promises to rule wisely. The question is whether he can be trusted, and we all have our doubts. Our attempts to Foretell have yielded no clear vision of the future. "Seven Wrongs and Seven Princes" is a hope, not a prediction.

We can never be sure, and yet we must act soon or never. As this happens I will instruct young Diccon in our arts and hope this world holds a place for him and all of us. I doubt if I will but perhaps he will live to see a further turning of the tale that began long before the Smiles and Frowns.