Flash Fiction Competition 2016

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I feel my shitty clothes. It’s not easy travelling with Juan Ponce de León because he’s an arrogant, selfish prick.

He excels however in dangerous situations, which his hand gesture indicates we are in, yet again.

I saw the traveller of course, because I am as alert as Juan after all these weeks, making our way back to Spain. He seems relaxed and friendly.

Juan’s hand is in his left trouser pocket where he always keeps sand, which means Juan is suspicious and if Juan is suspicious, the traveller is a thief.

Juan

Margarita Clara Rodriguez is a stuck up, arrogant bitch. It took days to persuade her to ditch fancy clothes and pretend to be my servant. Her haughty airs often give us away. Unfortunately, she is also key to riches and land, so I hope she is paying attention.

I scan the layout of the rocks, copse and undulating landscape and I don’t like it. I run my eyes over the older man, sitting on the rock. I know a thief when I see one and you my friend are a thief. The only questions are; are you also dangerous and do you have an accomplice?

My rifle is loaded but fairly useless at this range but its butt is no stranger to blood. I decline his offer to sit and take bread. Menace flicks through his eye. It’s gone instantly, but we both know.

Margarita

Sand hits the thief’s face as he pulls his pistol. Ducking, he catches it in the left eye and curses. The pistol explodes as Juan’s rifle butt deflects it up and slams the thief’s ear. A scream. I freeze.

No one is more surprised than me, when I leap forward in front of Juan and bawl “HALT”.

Juan

I am stunned. I hear only powder roar. The thief is down but the swordsman had me. The bitch just stopped him taking my head. Her mouth is moving. “Perra” I curse. The shame; the bitch is protecting me. My pistol is still in my belt but the swordsman is aware and close enough to strike.

I could just let the bitch take it and run but the idea fades as soon as it is born. We are linked. Our roles are reversed and I’ve no idea what she is doing!

I am ready.
Margarita
The deal is done. The swordsman, as an eagle with crows, shuns injury and is amenable to trade. I hold up a hand to restrain Juan. I tip the vase & shake. Two gold coins fall. His eyes are greedy but wary.

Juan
That night, we cook pork over glowing embers. I glance at Margarita with new respect. Her cunning and bravery mean we are still rich. She places two more gold coins in the Ming Dynasty vase, so carefully, encased in clay.
**Jack’s Hat**

“C’est le chapeau qui fait l’homme”

Our friend Jack, an otherwise unassuming man, has what Colin calls a hat fetish: it’s not that he goes in for tattoos or piercing or other kinds of body modification, he added. We wouldn’t know about that kind of body modification, said Benjamin. OK, said Colin, but it's clear he has an obsessive compulsive disorder about hats, we should try to help him, he's our friend. Yes, I said, what other man do you know who has a collection of 150 hats? – he's the Jay Gatsby of hats, the Imelda Marcos of chapeaux. Gavin calls him Mad Jack, thinking of the Hatter. I call him Jack the Hat, he can't think without his hat.

We decided to confront him, in a non-threatening way, especially after what Colin said, at our Friday evening in the pub. Jack appeared wearing an absolutely outrageous creation on top of his head. It looked like a cross between a crown and a church spire. I'd never seen anything like it. You must be joking! said Benjamin. Not the best way to start a conversation about someone's mental state. Where did you find it? asked Colin gently. It's from Tartary, said Jack, don't you like it? We were silent for a minute. Well, uhh, it’s certainly original, I said. That's the point! cried Jack, don't you see, every hat I have is totally unique, I've spent years tracking down each one. When did you go to Tartary? asked Gavin suspiciously, and just where is Tartary? You don't actually need to go there, or anywhere else, to track down a hat, replied Jack, Tartary is where you think it is. Gavin groaned. Colin gave him a dirty look. Jack didn't notice and went on, all you have to do is put yourself there in your head, and there you are: think about the people, the kind of life they lead, their trials and troubles, or conversely their happy, fulfilled lives. Is your life happy and fulfilled? asked Colin. Absolutely! said Jack.

After Jack had left, the four of us sat nursing our pints. Benjamin said, there's not many of us could say what Jack said about his life being happy and all that. Well, said Gavin, I think he's fooling himself, I don't think the hat's from Tartary. Benjamin, who's something of the scholar of our bunch, said, Tartary's an old name anyway, for central Asia or thereabouts. Gavin said, 'thereabouts' is all in his head. Maybe, Colin said, he's best left with his OCD, at least he's not about to go out and murder someone or something. But wearing such a crazy thing on your head is...is crazy, Gavin said. OK, admitted Colin, who isn't, in their way?
The Last Autumn Days of Dr John Rae

It was autumn and the low afternoon sun shone through the great oaks and birch trees in Kensington Gardens. The trees were fading and the leaves were changing to russet and red and falling in piles throughout the park. There were people strolling along the pathways and a horse-drawn hansom cab sped across the Serpentine Bridge while a nearby clock tower chimed the hour, echoing across the stillness of the afternoon.

A solitary figure walking beside the lake cast a long shadow in the low sun. He moved gently, his posture straight and upright, and though the hair and whiskers that framed his thin, intelligent face had turned silvery grey, there was a deftness about him that belied his ageing frame. He followed the curve of the water to the widest point where he stopped for a moment to rest. A soft, involuntary sigh escaped his lips.

At one time he would not have broken sweat over this distance, even carrying a laden pack and rifle. He caught his breath and looked over the lake. The rippling water sparkled in the sunlight, like the long, stippled, olive-green flank of a northern pike lying freshly caught on a Manitoba river bank. He moved on through the fallen leaves and remembered the feeling of breaking a trail across new snow with the birch shoes he had been taught to make by the natives.

As he rounded the wide curve of the Serpentine he only saw the snow-covered trail beside the Great Slave Lake, the black spruce, balsam poplar and pine trees, the fast flowing river and the tracks of caribou frozen in the snow. He remembered the silent thrill of stalking through the trees and the feeling of the fallen pine cones through his moccasins as he crossed the forest floor.

He thought about all he had learned and had failed to learn and of how none of it mattered anymore. He remembered how he had studied the different types of snow to understand whether a trail was passable or how he had learned to judge the currents on a stretch of river or the ever-changing arctic sky.

But he was old now and only ever wished he could go back to those places where he had felt most alive. Explorers were not meant to survive into old age, he thought. Their trail of bones should mark their discovered knowledge. He thought again of Franklin.
He passed the sweet chestnut trees and great oaks and remembered that moment, standing in furs, his face worn by the sun, looking north from the Boothia Peninsula over miles of frozen sea and a landscape that did not exist on the maps and charts of the men in London. Those intelligent men who ate well each day and slept soundly and warmed themselves in grand buildings while making their plans for other men. Who knew nothing of courage or sacrifice, nor of the suffering of those who shone light in the darkest corners of the world.
Once upon a time in the Swiss Canton of Valais, two brothers loved a woman named Chiara.

She was the youngest daughter of the oldest man in the village. Her mother had died some years before. All her siblings were married or off soldiering in faraway lands, so it had fallen to Chiara to care for her father. He was a bilious and possessive soul, whose daily demands Chiara bore with pleasant fortitude.

The two brothers were the sons of the richest man in the village. They had grown up with the comfort of warm fires to sooth winter chilled bones and summer days spent roaming the forests and hills, as carefree as mountain goats. Come autumn, they liked nothing more than to take their guns and hunt for beasts, small or large.

It was on such a day that they first encountered Chiara. She was carrying an urn of cool stream water to bathe her father’s swollen feet. A light breeze caused dark curls of hair to caress her cheeks, all rosy from fresh air and exertion.

In an instant of mutuality, the brothers were smitten. Each silently vowed to make this radiant beauty their wife. They detained Chiara in gentle chatter, offering to carry her urn and to bring her the fruits of their hunting for her cooking pot. She declined with a smile, though her heart was beating like a bird fit to burst from its cage.

As the season turned golden, the three would meet briefly each day, for Chiara was ever conscious of her filial duties. Her time with the brothers became daily more precious in the knowledge that her father would never allow her to marry. Even if he were to consent, how could she choose between two such fine men?

When the first snowfall arrived on All Saints Day Chiara was not there to meet them. The brothers agreed that Chiara should no longer be subject to the tyranny of her father. They abhorred the prospect of her trapped like ice frozen to the lakeshore. They determined that whoever could free her from servitude would have the reward of being her husband.

It was the elder brother who shot him. As tradition of birthright must prevail. Being the son of the richest man in the village, he anticipated no repercussion.

After a brief period of mourning he went to claim his bride. His action had been a rising sun of certainty for Chiara. He had saved her from the bindings and boundaries of her life and shown her the wide open sky beyond the high peaks which surrounded their village.

Once upon a time a woman called Chiara loved two brothers. She did not know how she would decide between them until the moment the elder brother made possible her choice.
So she took the hand of the younger brother and together they left the Canton of Valais to make a new life far away from the burdens of family jealousy and bitterness.
They came upon him, sitting on a grassy knoll, seemingly in silent contemplation. He wore a loose habit and old leather boots. They thought him to be a journeyman taking a rest, or a monk.

"I am not who I appear to be", the stranger addressed them as though he had read their minds. The young couple reeled a little in surprise since they had not yet spoken a word, not even in greeting.

"You are Tom and Mary, just wed and Tom is about to return to his regiment. You, Mary, are seeing him to the road yonder those trees where a carriage will meet him."

"Who are you?", Tom asked. "How do you know us, since we don't ken you?"

"Aah", the man assumed a knowing demeanour "I am omnipresent. I am the past, the present, the future."

“If you are all those things, you must different from us”, ventured Mary cautiously, not wishing to offend the stranger. “You must be a ghost or supernatural being of some kind.”

The stranger inclined his head almost imperceptibly.

His striking green eyes held her quiet chestnut-eyed gaze with an invisible force from which Mary was unable to look away. The unusual gold flecks at their centre appeared slowly to dilate until the scenery was mirrored in them as in a loch, momentarily calm, before a rising storm disturbs its waters.

To Tom the man said, “You will return from the war almost whole, but it won’t be the same war or the same century”.

As he spoke those words the landscape behind him appeared to transmute and dissolve like a watercolour painting in the rain. The stranger, still seated, melted away, soundlessly absorbed into the gently undulating ground. Tom looked around for Mary, but she too began fading into her surroundings. Just before vanishing completely she waved and blew him a kiss, as he knew she would seeing him off on the coach.

The distant rumble of gunfire penetrated Tom’s consciousness, immediately followed by the sensation of searing pain ripping through his left thigh. Grey light seeped through his eyelids. Tom snapped open his eyes. He saw his blood-soaked clothes. Then, as the stench assailed his nostrils he realised he lay in a trench surrounded by dead and and dying comrades.

Much later, lying in a huge tent, a make-shift field hospital, with hundreds of other soldiers he heard the exhausted nurses speak of “Flanders” and “fields of blood”.

Tom was one of the lucky ones, they said. The bullet hadn’t done too much damage. In time he would walk again. He asked what year it was.

“1916”. If he didn’t know that perhaps it wasn’t only his leg that had sustained injury, they laughed.

He was discharged, sent home to convalesce. As he left he was handed a letter. It had taken months to reach him. His wife had died in childbirth. His son had been stillborn.

END
Beatrice

I am perched on my rock ignoring the damp seeping into my nether regions. I sit here because it is a restful little rock and I like resting when Gideon appears wearing that smirk, the lovely Beatrice in tow.

I try to sound bright and breezy although I worry when I see Gideon smiling. “Morning Gideon, how goes it?” He nods back, surveys the horizon. I nod to Beatrice despite not being properly introduced. She gives a hint of a smile, the tiniest hint of a curtsy although that could just be one of my fancies. I start to think of some things I have fancied doing with Beatrice before but Gideon interjects favourably

“Let me introduce Beatrice. Beatrice this is Cameron.” Well, I am a very courteous so I stand, bow, grab her hand and kiss it like a gentleman should. I exclaim “Pleasure to make your acquaintance”. She looks at me enigmatically, shyly.

Gideon looks at me as if inspecting livestock. “Got a bit of spare time on your hands? Fancy a few coins in your pockets Cameron friend?” I put my hand on my chin to show that I am all ears. “Beatrice has kindly a greed to lead us to treasure. She knows where the valuables are kept on the big farm and when the owners are away. That time is now, if we make haste, we can be rich.” Beatrice walks ahead. He touches my shoulder. “Bit of luck eh? Seeing her and then getting such a lucky offer.”

I keep a weapon like Gideon does but I would never use it. I have never liked hunting and I could not bring myself to use it on another human however despicable but appearances matter so I pretend.

We follow a winding track. She surprises us by not heading for the farmhouse but an outbuilding not even as grand as a barn.

She unlocks the door, lets us go first. She says “good luck” as Gideon brushes past, whispers it to me, gently rests her hand on my shoulder, my heart skips. I think things could go further soon.

I stumble into a dark space, a strange place to keep treasures perhaps but I suppose if it seems strange then it is sensible? I look back expecting Beatrice to be framed beautifully but the door slams shut, a lock turns. A treacherous voice trills “Your poachers are there, can I claim the reward please?” Coins tinkle musically. The voice protests “not so generous sir, I hope you are going to be kind, they are just idiots, one buffoon thinks he is wise, the morose one thinks he is a charmer.”

A gruff voice bellows, “Leave it to me, I’ll teach them good morals.”

I hear a click that I recognise from toying with my gun.
The door opens again, a giant silhouette appears in the doorway “right, which one of you wants to be taught a lesson first?”
The darkly dressed man standing outside the bank was breathing heavily and sweating. Although the man didn’t know it, the next few minutes would change his life (and others) forever. He’d been in trouble with the Police before but he felt much more nervous than those spells. He shuddered at the thought of going back inside a young offenders institution. Harsh, violent. Prison would be even worse. Even if this latest job failed, he decided that he would still go straight. He was in a rut; he wanted the good things in life and eventually a family with kids. He mused to himself that he was born on the wrong side of town, but now going to the right or the rich side of town.

D-day had arrived. He parked his stolen car in a block away from the bank. He made his way to the bank pulling his cap well down over his face. His .357 revolver tucked in the back of his trousers, which he planned to ditch after this visit. He’d never used it but realised it was there as a backup, mainly as a bravado piece with his dubious friends. If this job eventually failed, he soberly thought, it he may just be 7, 10 or 12 years.

He realised it may be his last day of freedom as he nervously marched into the bank. There were a couple of people in front of the chosen cashier so he went to the cash machine inside the bank. When the two customers had gone he felt sick as he got the courage to go up to the bank cashier behind the bars and glass.

“Hello. How are you? Can I help you?” the attractive cashier asked.

Drat thought the man, he’d been recognised, and it was now or never though.

As the man got flirting to her, he looked behind him before pulling out his previously written note band slid it under the counter.

The note said he’d like to “borrow” £150,000 which put a look of shock and horror on the female cashier. The cashier realised the robber was looking to see if she’d go for the panic button but she just froze.
“£150,000 yes that may be for a house later on” said the man. “But first, I was wondering if you fancy going out for a drink this weekend? On the back of the note is my phone number and address so you can let me know if that’s okay with you. Sorry to approach you at work like this.”

“Yes”, the bank cashier replied, “I’d love to meet up for a drink. How about tonight? “Say the Kings Head wine bar at 8pm?”
“See you there” the cashier smiled as her colleagues all giggled as they realised romance was in the air.
The Climb

There was two of them went up that day and I won’t say who came down again. We heard that they travelled from elsewhere to climb, this man and his brother, and they stayed with the smith that first night. I was sent along in the morning to act as guide for the foothills and they spoke to me in this accent. They asked did I know what a certain plant was called and what names did we give to features in the land?

We made a stop out of tiredness and the man showed me something from his pocket. It was this kind-of watch and he said something strange. He said, ‘Soon these hills will be ours and your sort will be long gone.’

He had his gun so I was quiet. I poured wine.

The brother kept records of the walking. He had papers and instruments for doing so and he was a kinder man – he said, ‘Don’t,’ after the man talked of my sort being gone.

They asked to be shown the Dolphin Sound, so I brought them there. This was where the waters were moving with fishes and so on. The ground went down and under the waters and no one lived here because of storms. The man and his brother made measurements and put some dirt in a glass canister.

The man said, ‘This is a foul place.’

‘But fertile,’ said the brother.

The man pointed his gun at something on the horizon but it was for fun because nothing was there.

They asked to be shown the Sleeping Soldier, so I brought them there. This was these rising hills just before the peaks. From there you could look out over the village and the fields and the river’s rope of movement.

‘Take a good look at this,’ the man told me, ‘for soon you will have no claim.’

The brother scolded the man by saying his name to him.

‘What?’ laughed the man. ‘She does not understand.’

Night came and it was in my contract that I would spend it with them. They built a camp on the Sleeping Solider and I showed them where to find rabbits and country cabbage. I was paid to stay
watchful in the night hours, to call if I saw wolves or bandits. Nothing came, so the man and his brother woke fresh.

They said goodbye and went off to the peaks. I stayed by the dead fire and peeled eggs. I watched the man and his brother get smaller, up on the mountainside, and I was laughing. Then I watched them come down again, a short while after.

‘You’re still there,’ said the man; the brother just stood.

I bit an egg.

‘I’ve left my gun someplace,’ said the man.

I took out the gun and the man shook his head.

He said, ‘Give that back to me.’

So I held up the gun and the brother said, ‘Oh no,’ and I bit another egg.
Bees

It was a warm afternoon, as warm as that of the day before and that of the day before that. It was a quiet afternoon, as quiet as that of the day before and that of the day before that. The sentry took off his musket and leaned it against the huge stump of a tree, as he did yesterday and the day before. A thick carpet of moss covered the stump, thick soft moss. The sentry sat himself down. He wanted to think, but heard a faint, penetrating buzz. A very faint, penetrating buzz, so faint that others would have missed it, but not he. He, the regimental buzonki champion, he, the winner of the Banjaluka cimbalom competition, he, the composer of three mazurkas for the zither. Other would have probably thought that the buzz was an echo of last night’s ouzo or slivowitz or raki or perhaps of a combination of all three. He knew that it came from somewhere outside, that it was slowly growing and so were the footfalls. People were coming up from the camp beyond the hill. There were only two of them. they were coming up the path.

The muzzle of a musket and a shiny conical object were the first appear from behind the edge of the hill; then an urn, which wobbled a little as if it were bobbing on the surface of water; then a man’s head wearing a conical hat and the head of a woman. Now they were in front of the sentry: a tall man wearing a conical hat and a woman with an urn balanced on her head. She steadied the urn with a shapely prosthetic arm made of pale wood. The buzz, though subdued, was much louder. “Even that tone-deaf balalaika idiot from the third company could hear it now”, thought the sentry, and said:

“Where to?”
“‘To the apiary’, said the man in the conical hat. “To the apiary in the valley where flowers grow”!

“You have got it!” said the sentry, “you have got the swarm.”
“Yea, I got it. Once I got the queen and put her in the urn others followed. You probably cannot hear them buzzing, but they are buzzing. It is a happy buzz.”
“I can hear the buzz alright, but I thought it came from your hat!”
The tall man slowly lowered his musket.

“I meant your strikingly lovely hat,” said the sentry very quickly.
The young woman moved her wooden arm. The buzz grew louder. She said:
“It is taller than the urn, your hat is, and it shines.”
“It glows,” said the guard, “it glows!”
“It glows brighter than the urn,” said the woman.
Slowly, the tall man lifted his musket onto his shoulder. “We must go, or they will be very hungry,” he said.

“Yes, we must, see you sometime,” said the woman very hurriedly.

They moved quickly. The buzz grew fainter.

It was warm in the sun. The sentry stretched himself.
As it appears.

You tell me it is a woman's place to carry the water. So I strut, with one hand behind my hip, pretending to be the dutiful future wife. But you don't even notice. You are more interested in my blooming thighs, my ample bosom, the way the blue cloth of the dress hides my slender legs.

And look at you. You feel like a complete man, with a man sized rifle over your shoulder, your pistol strategically placed near your crotch and your spiral hat pointing into the heavens. You have your head in the clouds alright!

You introduce me to your friend, your best man you say. He is not impressed. He folds his arms, fed up by your bravado as much as I am. He is a man with more experience, an older gentleman who knows when to rest. Under his arm he has a water container for the journey ahead. You, unprepared, want to drink now.

Your best man carries a gun but he is discrete with it, not concerned with exhibiting himself like a prized cockerel. Your friend thinks you are a fool, trying to impress a lady like you do. You claim to be the prince of the forest and regent of the mountains. You don't know it but I'll never be your queen. I'll never travel with you to your village, over the mountains to sunnier climes.

My brothers are in hiding, frightened by your awesome reputation. When news came that you were looking for a bride and that I would be the honour of a new peace treaty between your people and mine, they dared not speak or show their faces. I am not like my brothers in many ways. I am not frightened and I am not a coward. I do not believe in honour. I am a woman with a very strong individual will.

I let the vase slip from my head and it crashes on the rock beside your friend. You both jump, startled and distracted by the thousands of pieces that are scattered. With my left hand, I point my hidden pistol at your friend and shot him in the scull at close range. I then turn in your direction but my gun misfires and the second bullet only grazes you.

I am lucky you are not the man you pretend to be. You are not a man of action, a hunter of animals or wives. You are a child, grovelling at my feet for mercy.

I take aim once more but before I shoot, I hear my oldest brother’s voice. Think he says, about what you are doing. We will never be able to live in peace if I kill the stranger. Our family home
will become uninhabitable, life will never be the same again. I only hesitate for a second, before pulling the trigger.
Tatyana knew what to expect.

It happened every year, here in her village in the midst of the Carpathians, on the anniversary of the death of Vlad the Impaler. She alone had managed to escape the annual carnage, to hide from the two perpetrators. She alone knew them by sight.

There was Proud Spike, the strapping moustachioed swaggerer, who displayed his fearsome impaling headgear in an open show of intimidation. Then there was Hidden Spike, the apparently diffident and easy going idler who concealed his smaller but equally lethal instrument of butchery beneath an unprepossessing hood.

The method was always the same: Proud Spike would emerge in front of a terrified mountain dweller, his gun slung across his back to intensify their dread. Then, as the hapless victim braced themselves in defence, Hidden Spike would make his nonchalant appearance, seemingly to effect a rescue. The unfortunate peasant would then lower their guard and be transformed by Hidden Spike’s implement of slaughter into a giant Transylvanian cocktail sausage.

Tatanya, though, was prepared.

She strolled along the mountain pass, her jug carefully balanced on her head. And then, with all the inevitability of doom itself, Proud Spike emerged to block her path, left hand assuredly in his pocket as he gazed on his victim with certainty.

‘I’m afraid, my young beauty,’ he purred, his smile wry and his eyebrow arched, ‘you are quite pointedly about to meet your end.’

Tatyana made a show of tensing her right hand on the jug and firmly planted her left fist into her side.

‘One more step, Proud Spike,’ she declared, ‘and I will smash this jug into a thousand jagged pieces over your head and rub those treacherous shards into your face.’
‘No need for that, my dear,’ drawled a pleasant, unhurried voice below Tatyana to her left. Hidden Spike had appeared noiselessly, and was now seated on a tree stump. ‘I am here to save you.’

‘Praise the saints!’ cried Tayana, and appeared to relax.

Suddenly Hidden Spike whipped off his hood, but Tatyana was faster. She lifted the jug to reveal her own spike, twice as sharp and murderous as those of her two tormentors, both of whom within seconds had been tossed lifelessly aside, looks of astonishment on their stiffening faces.

Tatyana cleaned her spike. Her intention had been to save herself and her fellow mountain dwellers. However, the experience had proved far more enjoyable than she could ever have ever imagined.

She replaced the jug just before the villagers started, anxiously, to re-emerge from their houses. Then, with an easy smile and a barely perceptible anticipatory shiver, Tatyana turned and walked slowly towards them.
Hell Hath No Fury

“Where’s the battle?” Igor demands of the old man relaxing on the grassy mound.

“Ere, can’t you see there’s ought but naught ere?” The old man is cross. His slumber has been broken and he is decidedly unhappy.

“There’s supposed to be a battle here and I was told to seek an old man in brown, which must be you.”

Igor is grumpy. He’s travelled far. His spire-like hat keeps slipping off his head. His musket is far too long, keeps catching on things and, worse still, a particularly ugly raven, the Devil’s own, has chosen to settle on it looking for an easy ride. All through his journey he has been the butt of wisecracks.

“Have a cuppa of this,” a weary Misha cajoles. All day she’s been peddling her special brew but to no avail. The urn is heavy on her head, her neck muscles are creaking under the strain. Her sudden appearance hardly dents the intensity of the situation.

“C’mon now, it was foretold that I would make my fortune in a battle following direction of a brown clad man,” Igor preens.

The old man peers intently into Igor’s eyes which are black as the raven hovering around the muzzle. The pupils are narrowed and the whites are streaked with red veins. He has seen this youth before for he is no ordinary being but then neither is the old man.

“Be off with you. There is no battle ere.” Eyes locked, the two men glare at each other.

“Just a thimble of this precious concoction will cool you down and ease your troubles away,” Misha interjects. Her voice is so soft like a tickle to their ears. Simultaneously each man scratches his ear and carries on arguing.

“I told you a hundred years ago and I am telling you again,” the old man has relived this tiresome scene for many centuries. His has been the unhappy lot to deter Igor from finding the battle which will make him an accidental ghost. Until the cycle is broken, neither can find peace.

Misha fidgets impatiently for her back is aching. She is not used to being ignored. Arms on hips she stamps her feet but the two men are oblivious to her presence.

Anger raises its ugly head. Rage surging through her wholesome frame she kicks at the urn, which flies upwards hitting the raven squarely on its beak. Squawking bitterly, it crashes into the spire of Igor’s pretentious hat sending it spearing towards the old man. To compound it all, the brew splatters everywhere drenching the two men into sensibility of Misha’s presence.

“My uniform is ruined. I can’t go into battle looking like a drowned rat,” Igor cries for his vanity outweighs his battle lust. Turning away he marches off now in search of dry clothes.
The cycle has finally ended for Death has been cheated by an old adage, ‘Hell hath no fury like a witch spurned’.

(END)
I remember the day that picture you hold was painted. The artist, a fat man with soft hands, had travelled up from Boston - a long journey but one smoothed by the money we were paying him. For we were rich then.

Ah, the pride of youth. In Zurich, our father had been very supportive. A new world he had said. Empty. You can be kings. So we went, my brothers Franz, Josef and I.

We journeyed up in late August, some of the trees already burnished gold. As soon as we left Boston the dirt trail disappeared and the woods closed in.

Our land was the size of whole canton, further than the eye could see. Franz talked admiringly of the grass, the cattle it could sustain.

Trouble was not long in coming. Josef, he is the one seated, was out one day when he was snakebit. When we found him at dusk his calf was as round and as tight as a watermelon. He died that night and we buried him the next day.

I wished to go back then, for the land was too wild, I could see that. We were fools I said. Let’s go back to Boston. Or home, yes, home. Zurich. My brother though, ever the obstinate one, would not hear of it. Let your brother’s death be in vain he said. We will tame this land he said, it will all be ours.

There was no warning. The Mohicans had been friendly for years but the latest settlements, so far into their territory, had enraged them. Franz was outside tending to the pigs, I was inside making a pie, when I heard the whooping. Looking outside I saw the men chasing my brother as if a game. Suddenly my brother stumbled and they were on him, hatchets flailing.

I suppose some time had passed but I had done nothing, bolted no doors. It was then that Makkapitew walked in. He held a stone club but did not seem concerned. I remember him examining the pie before taking a bite. He smiled at me as the gravy ran down his face. It was then that he took me. I had never been with a man before.

It’s strange now looking back. It is as through a fog. Makkapitew took me as one of his squaws - a great honour, and at some risk to himself. He killed one young brave though and ate his heart, and then the matter was dealt with. He grumbles at night about the settlers, but these forests are endless, we have nothing to fear. The whites will stay in the towns on the coast I tell him. This land is too wild for them, you are too strong. I live for the nights when he will visit me; I never thought love could be so big.

Have the painting. Send word to my father if he is still alive. Tell him I found my kingdom.
“A hunter, a water-bearer, and a cross-dresser walk into a bar . . . .”

“Hold on, this sounds familiar.”

“Let me finish the joke, wench.”

“Shh! Would you two shut thine von Trapps? I thought I heard something.”

“Sure you did, Leslie. The hills are alive with the sound of music, right?” Micheline winked at Barry.

“There! Did you hear that? A sort of hum and a bang.”

They stopped and listened. They were rewarded by the first drops of rain, the smell of fresh manure, and a bang.

“It’s probably just someone shooting rabbits,” said Barry.

Leslie pulled his hood up. “What rabbits? Thoust killed them all last week. And very nice boot trimmings they made too.” Barry and Leslie admired their boots. Micheline rolled her eyes.

The rain started to come down harder, plink-plonking into the jug on Micheline’s head.

A revving sound approached behind them, followed by a hum and a bang. The three of them looked at one another.

“Sounds like an automated carriage,” said Micheline.

“Up here?” said Barry. “But there aren't any roads.”

The revving got louder. A yellow tractor came into view at the top of the neighbouring hill.

“Is that not Al the bartender?” said Leslie.

“What?” said Barry. “No. Couldn’t be.” Barry looked at his boots. His face was drained of colour.

Leslie and Micheline stared at him. “Barry. What hast thou done?”

The rain continued to fall, a little heavier now and steady. Barry watched the ground gradually turn to mud. Leslie and Micheline waited. The tractor was halfway up their hill and had started spluttering.

Barry sighed. He kicked the ground with his toe, splashing mud onto his new rabbit fur trim. “Well,” he said, “there may have been a small misunderstanding.”

Leslie and Micheline continued to stare.

“I made a wager. Just a little one. Really of no consequence.”
Leslie and Micheline remained silent. The revving was quite loud now and they could smell exhaust fumes.

“I may have bet my life on England winning the World Cup.”

“You what?”

“What wast thou thinking?”

“I may have had a bit to drink. I didn't think he'd take it literally.”

The revving stopped. A man with a beard and a balding head stood up and aimed a shotgun. A roar sounded and Barry’s tin hat crashed into the mud. Barry's face was awash with shock, his moustache quivering.

“My hat!” said Barry, as the bartender aimed his shotgun again, this time a little lower.

“Leave it!” said Micheline, picking up her sodden skirt with one hand, the other still holding the jug firmly on her head. “Run!”

The three young people ran down the hill, heading south.

The bartender fired a shot into the air, then put his shotgun down. He climbed out of the tractor, picked up the pointy, conical hat, wiped it on the seat of his trousers, and placed it on his head. He grinned. It was a killer hat.
Mountains

You can’t miss a stranger in the mountains. Even so, this one swaggering down the path is especially conspicuous. Suave and statuesque, he’s wearing the tallest hat I’ve ever seen. It crosses my mind that favouring headgear that high, not to mention a rifle that long, suggests a lack of confidence in size elsewhere.

As he passes me in the meadow, I allow my pot to slip from my hands. Gallantly, he leaps to retrieve it and I blush and stutter my gratitude. I know I’m no beauty, but experience has taught me few men can resist a milkmaid. He’s probably already picturing my body pressed between his own and the wildflowers.

My husband is sitting outside the house, and as he watches us approach his expression reads, *Again?* The stranger hesitates, but I lead him inside by the hand, so he knows my husband doesn’t mind - or if he does, he’s tolerant.

The three of us sit down to a modest meal of cheese and bread and cheap wine from the valley. The stranger professes to enjoy this drink, making him either a fool or a liar. He tells us his name, but it’s foreign and fussy, so I instantly forget it. He speaks of his travels, of a faraway war, of his homeland. He’s neither witty nor interesting, I decide, as I top up his cup for the umpteenth time, but that doesn’t matter; storytelling is not how I expect him to entertain me.

By the time the third bottle of wine is uncorked, my husband is feigning sleep in his chair. This, I know, is my cue: *get on with it.*

Once more, I clasp the stranger’s fingers with my own, and he staggers after me into the bedroom. He’s left his jacket and that heinous hat by the door, but I unbutton his shirt, and peel him out of his boots and breeches. His skin is sticky with sweat, and after I push him to the bed he writhes to try and stay awake and upright. I straddle him, and he’s as helpless as a new-born calf. It only lasts a few moments, from the flash of the knife to his gargles turning silent, but they are sweet, sweet seconds, and as his blood gushes hot over my hands, I want to climb into them - into that instant when the stranger understands - and live there forever.

Afterwards, my husband comes in to collect the clothes. They’ll fetch a good price in the markets, especially the boots, and somewhere in the fabric I can hear the clinking of a coin purse.

‘I think that’s enough now,’ my husband says, pausing at the door, shifting his weight from foot to foot. ‘No more.’
I say nothing, but peer at my blood-spattered reflection in the blade. Why doesn’t he understand? There’s no harm in it: you don’t miss a stranger in the mountains.
The image for posterity

And who do they think they are anyway, with their silk shirts, their fitted doublets, their fancy breeks, their garters, their buttoned hose, and the shoes that would look better on the dance floor than up here in the hills? And as for that hat – yon big one has on a fantasy hat, only fit for a German princeling!

As my mother would say, any fellow with any sense would be dressed in a kilt up here – it’s great for keeping the cold out, and the rain off you, and your clothes out of the mud. They say they have come here for the shooting, but the big one stands there with a musket over his shoulder, so heavy that he would tire if he carried it far, and so long that he has no chance of taking a pot shot at any bird before it has fled. And the little one has sat down now, his musket under his arm. It looks as if he won’t go any further, and who would blame him, all got up as he is. They think I am a daft country lass, with no education. Little do they know that I can read and write, and have learnt some French too – my father was exiled in France after the ’45, and taught me when he got home. I’ll not be telling them that, I’ll just play my part for them. So they have decked me up like a Grecian woman, with an amphora on my head, and got me to walk up here with a pitcher full of wine on my head – plenty for a party of 20, and there is just the pair of them to share it and them with a whisky flask on their belts. Then they also got yon wee sleekit Italian painter to come along with his sketch pad, to “immortalise us for posterity”, half way up the Braes of Breadalbane, looking as if this was an everyday occurrence. I wonder to myself where is the posterity going to come from. That pair, they only have eyes for each other. Which is fine by me, but gives them little chance of an heir.

With all their fancy clothes, and fancy ways, I wouldn’t give them the time of day, for all the sheep in England! Give me a big fellow with a warm heart, and a deep laugh. That’s the fellow for me!
Deer Hunting

It was a nice day in the woods of France, where the French regiment had camped. They were in a clearing with only one derelict cottage in it. Several of the officers had banded together to go hunting, with them a young captain named Philip Toad. He stood with a musket in hand and his pistol round his waist. His friend sat on a log, wearing under his cloak, his drum major uniform. They entered the wood with three other officers, they stayed just in the tree line, when Philip shot and got a rabbit right in the eye. After an hour they went back and sold their quarry to a lady from the nearby village. They rested when Philip cried out,

“I want that deer we saw!”

They betted that whoever got the deer would get to keep all the money from selling it.

They set out once more; Philip got a fox and two rabbits, when he saw the deer. This was a big beastly stag, worthy of only a fine shot. Philip shot his musket, he missed and sent the beast flying, and he then took a pot shot at it with his pistol and hit it in the leg. It stumbled away with Philip on its tail. Chasing after the stag Philip noticed the lieutenant of the skirmishers, he was flying after it.

Suddenly a splintering noise and an antler shattered, the drum major had shot the beast’s left antler. It charged the drum major, when two shots hit it in the neck. The officer of the Grenadiers and a lieutenant had shot it from twenty yards away. The skirmisher also shot and hit, bringing the beast to a halt. The drum major then pulled out his pistol and shot the stag in the back. Philip took a shot and also struck home. The grenadier then shot his pistol; he missed and struck a tree, sending the beast limping away.

The stag was now by a lake where all five stopped and fired at it. It fell to its knees, and trying to get up, took the final shot, right in the eye. Philip walked up to his prize, sneering, he then said,

“Nice try boys better luck next time.”

The others helped drag the once proud carcass back to their camp

As the officers arrived back at camp, Philip sold his prize to the lady who was there. The villagers left with the stag, when the orders came. The five proud officers lined their men up, took their positions, and marched to their deaths in the fields of Flanders, near a small village named Waterloo.
The Crown

Today’s the day it arrives, my fancy new crown. It has been a long wait but it’s here. “Damn I look sweet,”
“No you don’t you look like an idiot,” replied my wife. “I bet that if I had a vase on my head, everyone would think I look better than you.
“Fine then, you bring vase and let’s ask the people what they think,”
“Alright everyone will be laughing at you,”

So we walked to town to ask the people who’s is better. “Hello Josh,”
“Hey Josh,”
“Hello friends,” replied Josh “You to look like total idiots wearing that tin hat and that vase,”
“Excuse me,” I exclaimed “I believe that this crown looks very fashionable,”
“No you look like you just came out of a mental asylum,” Josh said while laughing.
“That’s what I said but he’s just an idiot,” my wife told Josh “I’m wearing this vase to show it looks better,”
“Well it sure does look better than his crown,” replied Josh
“I’m leaving; I’m going to find some people that understand fashion,”

So as me and my wife walked t find some people to judge our crown and vase. We found a small village so we went there to go ask the people.
“Hello everyone me and my wife would like to see you and judge who looks better,” I screamsed at the top of my voice. As I said that the whole village blew up in laughter at me for wearing a crown, so I decided to just walk home. My wife started to catch up to me, she had left the vase.
“I’m sorry but I don’t want to be seen in public with you wearing that thing,” I took off the crown and put it in the bin. But when my wife was sleeping, I decided to go out and buy an even bigger and better one. So I went back to the fancy dress store and bought another, better one.

In the morning, my wife couldn’t stop laughing.
“Haha, where do you even buy these things?” my wife said, laughing uncontrollably.
“I bought it in the fancy dress store.”
“Haha, are you serious, it’s not fancy clothes in there, it’s costumes!”
“I will go put it in the bin.”
“Haha, wow, I haven’t laughed like that in years.”
“I’m going to stay in for a while.”

“That’s okay, I know you are embarrassed.”
The Thief And The Prince

The market was filled with the screams and shouts of many merchants telling folk their wares. Many people visit this land at this time of year as it is the annual Tyrial festival, an event that lasts all through July and the merchants from all over the world visit to sell the people their wares. But there was one man in the crowd that did not seek the merchants, but the rich, especially the rich with money in their pockets.

The man wore a brown, hooded cloak with a sword strapped to his back and a round, yellow bottle swung from his shoulder. Nobody paid any attention to him as weapons were common and they were too busy looking for the cheapest fruits.

As the man sneaked through the crowd he had not found his target but then he saw him, the Prince. The prince was a handsome man with small guns on his belt and a big one strapped to his shoulders. He could not see his face but he knew he was the prince because of his tall black crown. This was his chance to finally get some money.

As the thief approached the Prince's pockets he could make out more details about him, particularly his face. He had small, beady eyes, a normal moustache, wide looking ears and a small reddish mouth. His face seemed familiar but he didn’t quite know how, that was until the Prince turned around and spotted him. His face lit up and suddenly he shouted out loud, “brother!”

“I have been looking all over for you brother,” said the prince, it was at that point the thief knew exactly who it was, it was his identical twin brother, Jack Goldstein. They were separated when they were only five as their parents, the king and queen split up and took Jack leaving their other son, Robert and that is what he has been called since.

Jack seemed happy to see him but Robert was not happy to see him. “It's been a while brother.” Jack said, sighing with relief. Robert on the other hand squinted his eyes and said, “I wish not to speak with you brother.” He then spat on the floor like saying that last word disgusted him.” Jack just looked at him and said, “Come, let me show you my home.” Robert stood there staring at him, not knowing what to say at all but he said, “If I come with you, will you tell me why you left me?” Jack gave him a worried smile and said “sure.”
After Robert arrived at his house he found out that his brother had not meant to leave him and that he was a really nice guy. Jack even showed him his wife who was carrying the water back to the house with the jug on her head. Jack had offered Robert a place to live and he gladly accepted, things were starting to look great.
The Crown

A strange foreign man enters the market and all eyes are on him, he is wearing a white shirt, leather jacket and trousers, he is also wearing a stupid looking crown that he won while gambling at a table with a thieve and 3 shady characters. The foreign man thinks it looks good but the faces on the people staring at him tell a different story. Everyone had just stopped what they were doing and stared at him. He glanced around at everyone and said politely “what are all of you looking at”. No one spoke they were mocking him silently. The man took of his crown and left. All he wanted was for people not to stare at him even though he looked crazy. Once he got back the village he got the same look as before. His friends thought it was pointless as well and told him to get rid of it. But he wasn’t easily swayed. His friends are a maid in a local B&B and a classmate from back in the day. She was wearing a white dress and a blue skirt; she was also carrying a vase of water on her head because she was practising for her job. While he was wearing a brown robe and leather trousers and boot like his friend. They were sitting down arguing about the crown when all of a sudden 3 men burst through the old wood door of the shack door with muskets in their hands. The three thieves bound the friends’ hands and feet and took all the valuables even the crown. A few minute of struggling the three untied themselves and stared look at what was taken, the foreign man sulking over his crown while the others sulked over the turned tables and looted drawers. There was just something about the crown that he loved. The three of them stumbled into town asking about the three men no one knew anything and so they went to the police. The police had reports on the three men though they were vaig, the reports were from freaked out parents about men wearing black robe walking about town knocking on peoples doors asking for a crown and where they could find it. With more asking around town and the outskirts a farmer and his family saw the three of them riding on horseback each wearing a jewel encrusted crown.
The Danger of Absurd and Exaggerated Fashion

One day a stranger came to our valley. So much has happened since and none of it good. The strangest thing about him was his hat, not at all like our traditional chaperons which protect in all weathers. I had not thought that a hat could have any other purpose until then.

Fergus was enthralled from the beginning and a shiver ran up my spine.

‘I am a ... hunter,’ the stranger explained.

True, he had a gun and other accoutrements. But the towering hat did not suit such employment. I watched him study the view: woods full of game, streams teeming with fish, fields burgeoning with crops.

Fergus said, ‘We are blessed, you are welcome to take as you please. There is enough to share.’

The man gave a thin smile.

Fergus offered food, led the way to our cottage.

I worried the stranger might despise our lowly circumstances but he stayed the night, and many more—always deep in conversation with Fergus—until I was quite relieved when he left one morning.

‘What a fabulous hat!’ Fergus said as we watched him go.

‘The wildfowl will see him coming,’ I replied.

Fergus sighed and turned away.

We busied ourselves preparing for the dark days ahead. There was little time for chatter until one evening when the work was done and the door was barred against the first of the winter’s storms.

‘The way it pointed up to the heavens,’ Fergus said, motioning with his hands, lost for further words.

‘He never took it off,’ I replied, ‘Not once.’

‘Shut up, woman,’ he spat.

It was a long winter. Fergus was sullen and when I tried to strike up a conversation he was irritable. All he seemed to think about was the hat—which had me pondering. What did the stranger go hunting for in that infernal assemblage?

My heart lifted when the spring returned only to sink again at the sight of the stranger on the path to our door. Fergus welcomed him like one of the family.

Then one day the man asked him to draw a map of the valley.

‘Come with me!’ said Fergus eagerly. ‘There’s so much to see: the pool where I caught my biggest trout, where we snared rabbits as children, the blueberries, the hazel copse where the ancestors...’
The stranger cut him short. ‘A simple map... woods, rivers, arable land, cottages.’
Fergus was wary but he obliged, warned such a map could never show the place in all its glory.
The man seemed satisfied and stood up to go. He said the King would be pleased.
Fergus never mentioned the hat after that. I often saw him staring into the distance. I was glad
the stranger was gone and prayed he would never return. But deep down I knew that he would,
and that when he came back he would not be alone. Fergus knew it too.
THE STAG WEEKEND

Everybody remembered, or so they claimed, the famous stag weekend in Scotland. There was no dispute about Calum, the groom, looking very impressive, turning up at the meeting point, just outside the hotel’s grounds, dressed in a Caledonian outfit with his father’s rifle to match.

Paddy had forgotten what the point of the weekend was, thinking it was just about drinking and so brought a large ewer of home-made beer and we all tried a glass or two and left the rest for Calum.

Sarah had picked up her boyfriend, Donald’s, invitation by mistake and thought that she was the prostitute and got dressed appropriately, although I never thought that blue was quite the right colour for her.

There was no sign of either of Calum’s brothers which we did not regret at all. The last member of the party was Leo, the best man, who had just started sketching the scene, as the sun began to set, when, Sarah picked up Paddy’ ewer and put it on her head. Paddy got out the stone ball to tie on Calum’s legs to stop him running away inappropriately.

It was at this point that memories seem to vary. However, we all agreed one thing which was that the bride, Sally turned up, which changed everything, as she took Calum’s gun away from him. The first definitely missed all of us. After that, I am sure she hit Sarah with a cry of “thanks for being a friend, you slut and you think that I want you to be my bridesmaid?”. I am also here to tell the tale, as is Paddy, although I am sure his version would be a bit different. Leo, definitely did not make it and was sadly missed by all of us who attended his funeral.
Found carved on Stone Tablets

When they tore down my temples
they forgot just the one
that held ancient pleasures
I was singing
and crying
In the ruins of old
So they gave me a dress
and I followed
the light of
their torches

The Small Man made them
dance
to the pulse
of my liver and ·
He made them forget
The blood of their peace
- and that they drowned
In my spirits
and laughed

Oh, I heard their jaws
Cracking
Heard their voices
flushing red
with delusion
Shouting new songs
Of answers
I’d once hoped
To give

And softly,
I’d pour them my name

In the first city we met
A man as a tower
All sinew
And grouted
With sweat
His eyes glazed
As he saw
Me
And with a
yawp
He gore
my dress open

Shreds stuck to my skin,
I stood
In crimson
Unchanging
The wind carving
A line
Through my jaw
never cracked

“I know what you are”
He roared
“I know what you’ve been”
“Who dare
bring her
Before me?”

And the smaller man chuckled
And whispered words
In his ear
And the tower, he
winced

“M’lady”, he offered
A hand
Loosened
From the grip of his
Sword
“M’lady, I hope
You’ll
Forgive me”

And they cut off parts
of my flesh
to feed
to their people
My flesh
simmered in
blood
on their torches
And torn by their teeth

New songs were written
of flavours
Unknown

I was tossed in her spices
They cried out the name
She had carried
And between gasps
I ascended her throne

Silver
All silken
Thrown over
My gorges
In gold
His hands traced
The line of
Another
Within me
And I saw the marks
Of teeth
In his flesh

And I knew him
I knew

They drew of his wine
As of mine

And we watched
Their amphorae
Run full
with our blood
saw them delve in so
deeply
red bubbles slouching
from low
they’d emerge
with bright eyes
Their cheeks stained
With religion

They left
a trail of our blood
as they climbed down
the mountain
A trail of our blood
as they sang
Our songs

(I’d long understood
That they hadn’t just
Forgotten
My temple)

- We smiled
For their voices
Kneeling before our
Hot breath
And they drank
They devoured

In this drought
They needed our wine
And we
Their desperation
The sheer force
Of tongues
Willing to lick off
Our skins
And of teeth
That would rip
Our flesh
into answers

I looked to the earth
The sand
As their heads moved on me
And through their bright eyes
I saw
The Smaller Man
With a jaw-splitting grin
That cracked right through him
And shivered
With joy

And I knew that
this
Was what he’d
Always wanted:

A dummy to -
So you fancy your chances, do you?”

“As much as anyone, Johann. Nice day for it.”

The two men looked over the valley to their destination, the castle of countless towers, sparkling like fine snow. Cowbells could be heard from far away in the clear air. Or maybe goats.

“Yeah, but you’ve hardly knocked yourself out this year, eh Gustaf?”

The older man sucked his few teeth and pondered his response to the lanky farmhand who was still catching his breath from the climb to what Gustaf liked to think of as ‘Gustaf’s View’ on the summit’s rock, smoothed by years of his sitting and enjoying a pipe or two. He’d been here before the king and his fancy castle, and he felt sure he’d outlive the queer fellow.

“Johann, I’ve been at this game longer than you, and I know that you never know what’s going to take his fancy.”

The young man suddenly felt unsure of his tactic. His mother had spent days on his costume and he’d begged his gran for old beads and ribbons from dresses she couldn’t squeeze into. That went hard with her vanity, but she relented.

“Even so, Gustaf, even a blind man would say you’ve missed, hahaha, the point!”

The competition theme this year was “The Point” and the prize was nine gold pieces, ten geese, a lock of the King’s hair and a kiss from his Majesty. Villagers from miles around vied for the set of prizes which varied each year, except the kiss, which was an annual constant and borne with fortitude by each winner, no matter how long, wet and lingering.

“Look here, gowk, I take as much pain over my costume as anyone. This came from thought and preparation. I can tell you, as you’re too late to run back to your mother’s and change your costume. See, I got chatting with the castle swineherd and he’s pally with the lass that cleans the chimney grates and I got her to tell me about the hats in the big pictures there. And my hat mayn’t look much to you, but it’s the spit of a hat-cloak-thing in at least two paintings I reckon.”

“Hello boys – getting on like two cats in a sack as usual?” Gerda the baker’s widow had joined them on the summit.

“You’re not entering the competition with that, are you?” Johann stared at the tall vase on her head.

“No, just something to spice the King’s pastries. Oh stop laughing or your church spire will fall off.” Johann grabbed his vast spiked confection of felt-covered planks and re-tied it under his chin.

“Mum said I’d to wear it all the time to keep it in one piece.”
“Right,” said Gustaf, “We’ve a long walk yet and the King’s mad enough to give the prize to his own shadow before we reach the gates.”

Poor Ludwig, thought Gustaf, did he ever wonder about the point of it all.