

THE TALE OF TALES

BY

Richard Harland

‘Storyteller! A storyteller! Come to port!’

I remember the cries, the excitement. I was only fourteen years old, and didn’t understand at first. We had storytellers enough in our own towns and villages. Why did we need a storyteller from foreign parts?

My sister, the Princess Kattey, explained it to me. ‘They say he has a new story. Perhaps more than one. Just think!’

I couldn’t wait then. There was a great gathering below the palace around Throm Veddel Hill, and people rushed in from as far afield as Tross and Sutter. The teller would tell his new story to an audience of ten thousand.

His name was Jarreck and he came from the Kinneth Isles on the other side of the Northern Continent. He was unimpressive in appearance, with a scrubby little beard like a goat and the straw-coloured hair typical of the outer isles. But the bearer of a new tale had an inner glory that transformed him in our eyes.

Kattey and I took our seats at the front of the audience on either side of the Queen, our mother, whose silver throne had been carried down from the palace. If the teller lived up to his claims, he would be instantly elevated to the highest honours of the land, and my mother would be expected to marry him. I’m not sure how I felt

about gaining a stepfather; compared to the prospect of hearing a new story, I probably didn't think about it.

An absolute hush fell over the crowd as Vikil, our Master Teller, led him up to the Tablestone. His voice was more powerful than his slight frame had suggested. In rolling tones, with all the mannered gestures of a professional storyteller, he began.

From the very first sentence, we were drawn in. He set the scene in a forest, where two companions journeyed along a dark path on their way to market. There were details of leaves and grass and bark, of the calls of birds and the buzz of insects, of the conversation between the two companions. But when a dragon appeared and blocked their way, when it asked them an unanswerable question ...

Have you guessed it yet? It was the Adventure of Lannard and Stort! The names were changed, they were journeying to market instead of coming home from war, and he'd put the dragon in a forest instead of a ravine—but it was the same story! He was telling us one of our own five tales!

I didn't realise until I saw the expressions on other people's faces. Even then, I continued to hope long after hope was gone. There were mutters and groans and a shuffling of many feet. Jarreck must have noticed the reaction, because his gestures became increasingly wild and emphatic.

In the end, the Master Teller mounted the Tablestone to whisper in his ear. He faltered for a moment, then recovered his nerve.

'Good folk of Drammerland, I beg your pardons, one and all. It seems I have been telling a story similar to one you already know. Farewell, then, to the dragon!' He swept his arm in melodramatic dismissal. 'I shall tell you a story known only to the people of the Kinneth Isles.'

So he began again, and told us about a prince who fell asleep in a snowy waste and was saved by a wolf with a magic collar. The wolf had a locked casket hidden in his lair, and a wicked robin spoke lies to the prince in a beautiful voice.

You'll see why we didn't recognise it at once. Not only the names and places had been changed, but he had combined two separate stories into one: the Crown in the Casket and the Quest of the Lonely Prince. Shameless manipulation! He was treating our best-loved stories like mere lumps of wood to be cobbled together in any way he saw fit!

No one gave orders: it was a spontaneous wave of outrage. The Royal Guard ran up the hill, followed by mayors and councillors and other front-row dignitaries, while the Guild of Tellers converged from behind. Jarreck was surrounded on the Tablestone. He fell to his knees as they clambered up, but it was too late to apologise. A rain of blows descended upon him. For a minute, I could see only the rise and fall of staves and truncheons, I could hear only the wretch's screaming.

Then the screaming stopped, the avengers drew back and a limp body rolled off the Tablestone and all the way down the hill. It came to a stop almost at my mother's feet, motionless on the grassy ground.

We jumped up to inspect. Jarreck's eyes were glazed and a froth of liquid dribbled from one corner of his mouth. He had cuts and bruises all over, but none serious enough to kill him.

In fact, Jarreck wasn't dead. When my mother summoned Randers Havinger, the Royal Physician, he discovered a steady heartbeat and shallow breathing.

'A blow to the head must have done it,' he announced. 'Causing a fit, causing a coma.' He had no idea how long the coma might last.

My mother considered that the punishment already outweighed the crime. She gave orders for Jarreck to be wrapped in warm woollens and furs, then carried back to the boat on which he had arrived.

The crowd began to disperse. I heard some of the old folk saying that five tales had been enough for our grandfathers and our grandfathers' grandfathers, so five tales ought to be enough for us too. But we younger folk weren't consoled by such reflections. We felt cheated.

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Kathey accompanied the Royal Guard as they carried Jarreck on a makeshift stretcher, and I went with Kathey. The boat that had brought him was a three-masted barque, tied up at Falster's Quay. As soon as the captain saw us approach, he hurried from his boat to confront us.

He objected vehemently when the Commander of the Guard told him to take his passenger back on board. 'Who pays his passage? I'm loading a full cargo. I can't afford passengers who don't pay their way!'

Kathey stepped into the argument: I think she was threatening to withhold his cargo altogether. The captain blustered, Kathey stood on her dignity and I stopped listening. Which is why I was the one who saw Jarreck raise an arm and wipe the froth from his mouth with his sleeve.

'He's awake!' I shouted.

His eyes were still glazed, but he began blinking when the Commander of the Guard slapped him none too gently across the cheek. On about the tenth blink, his

eyes started to clear and a look of intelligence returned to his face. Puzzled intelligence.

‘Where am I? What happened?’

‘We’re sending you away,’ said Kattey. ‘For fraud and deception.’

‘What happened?’

‘You claimed to have a new story, then told us old ones.’

His expression was as innocent as a newborn babe’s. ‘Did I? Why would I do that?’ He thought for a moment. ‘I *can* tell you new ones.’

‘There!’ crowed the captain. ‘You have to let him stay!’

Kattey shook her head. ‘He’s lying. He’ll tell us another old one.’

Jarreck propped himself up on his stretcher. ‘No, I promise. New as new.’

Kattey came to a decision. ‘Very well.’ She turned to the captain. ‘If it turns out to be another old one, you take him on board and no more arguing.’

The captain glowered, but knew he was trapped. ‘I’m just a simple merchant trying to make a living,’ he grumbled. ‘Nobody understands how small my profits are.’

Jarreck waited for silence. ‘I’ll tell you a story about a merchant,’ he began. ‘A merchant called Breid set sail from Knabel carrying a cargo of spices to the Northern Continent ...’

His voice was frail and tentative at first, but gradually gaining power. The habitual mannerisms returned: the rolling eyes, hand-gestures and dramatic pauses. He seemed to thrive on our attention.

And yes, he drew us in. We were reluctant, we’d been fooled before and we didn’t want to suffer another painful letdown. But when he told us about the great storm and the shipwreck, the cave and the mysterious glowing footprints, then we

gave ourselves over body and soul. It was like no story we'd ever heard, and it kept on growing and unfolding until our minds could scarcely contain it. By the time he finished, I swear we looked at one another with our mouths hanging open.

Was it better than the five tales? Who could make comparisons? We only knew that it was another tale, a sixth tale!

Kathey asked the question that was on the tip of everyone's tongue. 'Why didn't you tell us that one before?'

'Before?' Jarreck went cross-eyed with the effort to remember. 'I don't know what happened.'

'You were hit on the head,' said Kathey. 'That's what did it.'

'What do you call your tale?' I asked.

Jarreck flourished a hand. 'The Merchant and the Demon.'

'Will you tell it again now?'

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So everything came true in the end. More than true: because Jarreck didn't have only a sixth tale, but a seventh and an eighth and an eighty-eighth. Tales about fishermen and carpet-sellers, floating islands and towers of ice, black curses and salamanders and cat-people. Every week, he tells a new tale, and the Guild of Tellers spreads it throughout the length and breadth of Drammerland.

My mother was as much enchanted by his new stories as any of us, and they were married in a great ceremony on Throm Veddel Hill. Over the next three years, they passed many wise laws, so that our country prospered. Our Tellers have multiplied at

home and travelled abroad; and every King or Khan or Padishah welcomes our trade along with our stories.

Yet something has changed ... how can I explain this? When we had only five tales, each one was infinitely precious, and we would have fought to the death to preserve that heritage for our children and our children's children. But when our lives were filled with an unimaginable wealth of stories, no individual tale was worth quite so much. Of course everyone still rushes to listen, still gets carried away by the latest thrills and wonders. But people have been feeling a little guilty, as though they ought to be doing something else with their time.

There's another change, too. Although everyone rushes to listen to the first telling of a new story, there are only a few stories they want to hear repeated over and over in the old way. People have developed personal preferences: perhaps for stories with happy endings, or stories with swordfights, or stories with spells and magic. Likewise, the Tellers have tended to specialise. In any town or village, one Teller replaces another week by week, and each storytelling attracts a different crowd.

So many many stories. We used to wonder, when will they run out? How many more does he have in him? Wrong, wrong, wrong! All along, he'd had a secret that he hadn't been telling us. Or perhaps he had been telling us and we hadn't heard. There are still only a small number of us who know.

The revelation came a week ago. It had been a day of celebration for the third anniversary of Jarreck's marriage to my mother, and in the evening he gave us a new story about a fireworks-maker and his beautiful daughter. At the end, the daughter died by a terrible trick of fate, and we were all left sobbing over her tragedy. The Tellers dabbed at their eyes even as they raced off to give the first public recitations,

spreading the story to the general population. Only this time, Vikil, our Master Teller, stayed behind.

‘You are the prodigy of the world, sire,’ he said. ‘If I had such a sad tale stored in my head, I could hardly think of anything else.’ The Master Teller was known to have a preference for stories that made you cry. ‘Even your tale of the Lamp-Boy was never so sad.’

‘Tale of the Lamp-Boy?’ Jarreck leaned back on his throne. He had become fat and sleek with good living over the last three years. ‘Which one was that?’

Vikil began to recite it, but Jarreck wasn’t really interested. ‘Ah, one of my early tales, then?’

‘Yes, sire,’ Vikil agreed. It wasn’t the first time Jarreck had forgotten one of his own stories. ‘How many more tales do you have stored in your head, sire?’

Everyone held their breath, but Jarreck laughed. ‘None.’

Only my mother didn’t take it as a joke. ‘But surely you have other tales to tell us, my dear?’

‘Yes, but they’re not in here.’ He grinned and tapped the side of his head, surveying our baffled expressions. ‘I’ve told you before, but you never listen. There’s nothing stored. I make my stories up.’

What did he mean? We knew about things you could make up—like excuses, when you were late for a meeting. But stories were different, there was no comparison.

He went on to explain. ‘For example. The idea of the fireworks-maker came from the fireworks we were watching today. And my idea for the beautiful daughter came from one of the serving girls.’

‘*Today?*’ Vikil gaped.

‘Ah, there she is!’ Jarreck clapped his hands and beckoned. ‘Come over here!’

It was Rossund, a blonde pretty girl who had been brought in to help with the serving of the feast. She came forward, blushing.

‘You see?’ he said. ‘Golden hair and clear grey eyes.’

We shook our heads. Rossund’s golden hair was nothing like the golden hair of the fireworks-maker’s daughter. Her eyes were only clear and grey in the way that anyone’s eyes might be clear and grey. She didn’t have the same kind of beauty at all.

‘You can’t be serious,’ I protested.

‘Not exactly the same, Prince Siggen, of course not. For example, I took away that mole on her left cheek.’ He pointed and smirked, utterly pleased with himself. ‘But there stands the cause of my invention. Along with the fireworks.’

My mother uttered a tiny shriek, covered her face with her hands and ran from the room.

Jarreck turned to us in perplexity. ‘What’s wrong with her? What does she think? Does she suppose I’ve taken a fancy to the girl?’

He rose from his throne and hurried off in pursuit. ‘Wait!’ he called. ‘You don’t understand!’

But he was the one who didn’t understand. It wasn’t jealousy on my mother’s part, but shock. If he’d taken a good look around, he’d have seen the same shock on every face.

Suddenly, our wealth of stories had vanished. Our jewels weren’t just worth a little less, they had turned to pebbles. Or less than pebbles—mere bubbles of air! The inventions of a moment, spun out of nothing at all!

Then I remembered the time on the quay when he’d told us a story about a merchant—immediately after the captain described himself as a simple merchant. The

evidence had been in front of me all along, yet I hadn't seen it! I hadn't known how to see it!

And what about the blow to his head? We'd all thought it must have opened a channel to some greater depth of tales buried inside him. But there was no depth inside him! The blow had only emptied his head and created a space for stories to be made up out of nothing!

We looked at one another after he'd gone. No longer did we feel sad over the tragedy of the fireworks-maker's daughter. We were all thinking the same grim thought: he would continue making up his stories, more and more and more of them, for as long as he lived. That was when it was clear he had to die.

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We've prepared our coup and we're now as ready as we shall ever be. We haven't dared tell my mother, in case she says something to her husband. Jarreck has no notion that anyone has turned against him and seems more smug and self-satisfied than ever. Perhaps he imagines that we admire his cleverness in making things up! The cleverness of the charlatan!

No one is sure of success. The senior officers of the Royal Guard are on our side, but traditional loyalties are strong among the rank and file. And will the town militias join us or fight us? There may be bloodshed on a scale that Drammerland hasn't seen in four hundred years.

And what will follow if we succeed? This is a greater change than any coup or royal assassination in the past. We have agreed that the Guild of Tellers must be abolished forever, that we can't have Jarreck's inventions repeated and remembered

after we've got rid of the man himself. I feel in my heart that the old age is coming to a close and a new way of thinking will take the place of storytelling.

Who knows were it will end? So many uncertainties! Already there are factions among our supporters. Kattey as the eldest expects to inherit, but many believe I should take the throne as a male. The divisions are smoothed over, yet I have a bad feeling about the future.

I wish we could go back to the way we were when we had only five tales, before Jarreck ever appeared. But there's no going back.

Tonight it begins.

Richard Harland (Copyright)
