

A MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM BOOK 

**CHARLOTTE
MACLEOD**



**THE CURSE OF THE
GIANT HOGWEED**

A PETER SHANDY MYSTERY



The Curse of the Giant Hogweed

A Peter Shandy Mystery

Charlotte MacLeod

A MysteriousPress.com
Open Road Integrated Media
Ebook

*FOR ROBERT JOHN GUTTKE
Griffin-Maker to the
Court of King Sfy*

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Preview: *The Corpse in Oozak's Pond*](#)

Chapter 1

“FOR GOD’S SAKE, PETE, is that old coot still blethering?”

Professor Timothy Ames was sorry he’d bothered to wake up. He was also sorry he’d fallen asleep. These green fiber glass chairs were hell on an old man’s skinny backside. What the Christ were they here for, anyway? He hated being lectured at. He wasn’t used to assembly rooms carved willy-nilly out of erstwhile stately homes. He wished he were back at Balaclava Agricultural College in the hinterlands of Massachusetts, U.S.A., checking the boron in the beet fields.

His companion, the if possible even more distinguished Professor Peter Shandy, wished Tim would quit turning off his hearing aid. When it wasn’t operating, Tim never knew whether he was mouthing words without letting any sound come out, or bellowing like a bull in rut. This time, Tim had bellowed. Peter could only be thankful they were at a British university, where it seemed not the done thing to notice eccentric behavior in elderly academics.

Perhaps the speaker had his own hearing aid turned off. Despite Tim’s outcry and the few muttered “Hear, hears” that had followed it, Peter couldn’t see that Professor Pfylltrydd was showing any sign of shutting up. So far Pfylltrydd had said nothing about the giant hogweed, or *Heracleum mantegazzianum*, that the overseas visitors didn’t already know.

Naturally Tim and Peter had done their research before they’d agreed to come here and lend their expertise toward eradicating the oversized pest. They’d heard how this gargantuan relative of the cow parsley and the water hemlock was taking over the riverbanks and hedgerows. Smaller plants that couldn’t grow in its noxious shade were threatened with extinction. Bird watchers were being carted off to the hospitals with severe cases of whiplash from craning their necks to hurl anathemas up its fifteen-foot stalks. Courting couples were getting contact dermatitis in embarrassing places from brushing against its venomous bristles. Nudist camps were all but wiped out.

Fishermen were succumbing to apoplexy in droves. The accursed weed grew so thick around the streams that they couldn’t indulge in their piscatorial pursuits without importing machetes or sharpening up their ancestral broadaxes to hack their way to the water. And the dingy white flower heads were alleged to produce five thousand seeds apiece.

Peter Shandy intended to count a few headfuls of seeds. He was curious to know

whether five thousand was a true figure or merely one plucked from the air by some sensation-mongering journalist. The chances were it was fairly close to the mark, though: Mother Nature was apt to err on the side of prodigality.

When it came to wordiness, Professor Pfylltrydd was also a child of nature, that was plain. He was talking about the excellent work already done by hogweed experts on this side of the water. They'd thought for a time they had the hogweed hogtied, but all of a sudden, the weeds had begun to spring new-bristled, taller, ranker, smellier, and more pestiferous than ever before. They'd spread almost overnight to places where no hogweed had previously infiltrated.

This meeting was being held in one such place, among the lush green hills where England blends so delightfully into Wales and the sheep all begin bleating in Cymric as soon as you cross the border. Peter thought he could hear sheep bleating now. Or was that still the old goat maundering on about the hogweed?

Tim was asleep again. Peter was feeling his jet lag. When this ordeal by windbag was over, would his hosts offer him and his companions yet more cups of milky tea, or free them to go somewhere and sink their nozzles into pints of the magnificent local bitter? Peter thought wistfully of the pub in which his wife Helen and her dear friend Iduna Stott were no doubt resting their weary feet and wetting their dainty whistles after an arduous round of the sights and the shops.

It had been understood that he, Tim, and Dan Stott, the third member of their team, wouldn't be able to spend much time with the women. Their hosts were paying Tim's and Peter's expenses, hoping for great results from the developers of such horticultural wonders as *Brassica napobrassica balaclaviensis* and *Portulaca Purple Passion*. Since he was here on business, he ought to be keeping his mind on the discourse; but it kept drifting off into reveries about the respective excellences of Helen and British beer.

Then Peter sat up with a jolt. The speaker had actually and finally stopped speaking. There was a spattering of applause in which he only just managed to join. The learned lady conducting the seminar, whose name Peter couldn't for the life of him recall, was now suggesting their distinguished guest Professor Ames, or perhaps Professor Stott, or even Professor Shandy would care to address some of the points Professor Pfylltrydd had just raised.

Tim didn't stir. Dan Stott, on Peter's other side, was sitting rapt in reverie, perhaps computing the number of hogs that might be needed to eat up all those acres of hogweed, and wondering what would be the effects on their digestive systems if

they tried. Obviously, it was up to Shandy.

Peter couldn't remember any questions other than Tim's which had been brought up by Professor Pfylltrydd's discourse, so he decided to go with that one. He detached himself from his abominable chair, sauntered up to the front of the room wearing the expression of mixed humility and conscious self-satisfaction deemed appropriate for such occasions, took hold of the sides of the lectern, smiled (not broadly but enough to show he wasn't actually hostile), and said his piece.

"I expect you'll all agree that my learned colleague, if I may presume to call him so, has given us sufficient—er—food for thought at this juncture. Rather than take up your time with speculations on what might or might not be feasible courses of action, I'm simply going to ask that you point Professor Ames, Professor Stott, and myself in the general direction of a reliable car hire agency, a decent pub, and a clump of giant hogweed. Once we've done a little fieldwork, I trust it won't be long before we come up with some recommendations."

"On what do you base this confident expectation of a speedy result?" demanded the inevitable cynic in the back row.

Timothy Ames was awake now. He heard that one perfectly, and was ready with the answer.

"On the fact that Professor Shandy's wife has spent half the winter writing a paper on Belial Buggins, the Bard of Balaclava. She's been asked to present it at a conference in Arizona next month and there'll be hell to pay if we don't finish here in time to get her back for the presentation. Any further questions?"

There were none. Several of the listening savants smiled, one or two laughed aloud, and a learned academic discussion broke out as to which pub had the best bitter. The meeting was adjourned to the Pig in Clover. Peter had a pint and a plowman's lunch. Tim had a half and a small wedge of poacher's pie. Dan had the rest of the pie, a few pasties, and two pints. On their way to the car hire, he purchased five punnets of gooseberries and a whole Cheddar cheese to tide them over until they could get to a proper restaurant.

Peter had intended to rent a big car—big at least by United Kingdom standards—but there were only Fiats available. That was all right, they'd manage. Aside from their field equipment, he and the boys had little luggage. Peter himself carried his grandfather Shandy's old black cowhide satchel with a change of underwear, his razor, and field clothes to replace the good gray suit and white shirt he'd worn to the lecture. Tim had a clean pair of socks and a spare battery for his hearing aid crammed into a

pocket of his hairy old brown tweed jacket. Dan had his cheese, his gooseberries, and a pigskin suitcase packed with God knew what—sandwiches, probably—by the loving hands of Iduna. Dan got in back with the impedimenta, Tim climbed in front on the passenger's side, and Peter got to drive.

He'd expected that; in fact, he'd have insisted on driving. Peter was not only the youngest of the three, he was also the most likely to stay awake, to recall where they were going, to keep on the left-hand side of the road, and to know a giant hogweed when he saw one.

Once they'd found a suitable place to start, he and Tim would begin collecting plant specimens and soil samples. Dan Stott's function, as head of Balaclava's animal husbandry department and a noted authority on swine culture, was more nebulous. Peter suspected Dan had invited himself and Iduna along mainly because he found something appealing in the mere concept of a giant hogweed, and might secretly be on the side of the enemy. Dan would bear watching. That shouldn't be hard, of course, Stott's dimensions being what they were.

Whatever might be in store for them, the three old friends were merry enough as they set off on their quest for the giant hogweed. Nor were they long in finding some. It would have been difficult not to. The hedgerows so sensibly allowed over here to grow up and provide natural fences, refuges for small wildlife, and antierosion barriers for the soil instead of being mowed flat in the alleged interest of modern efficiency, were being taken over by the biggest and ugliest representative of the Umbelliferae.

The band of hogweed-hunters didn't stop to examine any of the available specimens though, until they'd put a safe distance between themselves and the halls of academe. The woods, as Tim observed darkly, might be full of goddamn professors wanting to make speeches. They couldn't be too careful. Hence it was not until the Fiat had carried them well into Wales that Dan Stott, who had steeled himself not to emit grunts of anguish at each pub they passed, suggested they might now think of stopping for refreshment.

Peter didn't mind. The field behind the pub toward which Dan pointed was rife with some of the tallest and thickest hogweed they'd spotted thus far.

Tim was all for stopping, too. "At least they'll have a gents," he observed. "One thing about the British. And the Welsh, I suppose I'd better say before they run me out of the country. They've got a civilized attitude toward the natural functions."

The pub even had a parking lot, about ten feet square and surrounded by a high stone wall. Peter couldn't get the Fiat in, though, until a brewer's lorry had

accomplished the patently impossible feat of making a full turn, then squeezing through a gateway some four inches narrower than the lorry. This being the land of Merlin, it took the driver three minutes. After that, they had the lot to themselves. Peter pulled up next to a rear door that led directly to the necessary offices. Dan, who'd finished the gooseberries but brought his cheese along for company, went with Tim into the men's room. Peter went on ahead to the bar.

As so often happens in country pubs, he found the room empty. That was all right. Peter didn't mind standing there admiring the mellow patina on the polished brass pump handles, weighing the relative merits of ale and lager. This place had an odd sort of atmosphere about it, he thought, and tried to figure out why. Perhaps it was simply that nobody was here, neither behind the bar nor hunched on one of the benches behind a pint glass as tall as his head. Perhaps it was because the pub was old. Really old, not tarted-up old.

To be sure, in this area anything not built by Edward the Second might be considered relatively modern. This had been a public house well before Edward's time, though. Maybe long before. Peter Shandy couldn't have said how he knew. The pub was clean enough, and reasonably well kept up. It must have been renovated many times. Nevertheless it smelled old. No, more than old. Primeval, like a forest floor that had never been cleared and put to the plow.

In centuries gone they'd brewed their own beer here, no doubt. It would have been thick and heavy, served in leather jacks that never got washed between one customer and the next. The customers wouldn't have been washed, either. They'd have had on crude homespun or leather garments, stiffened with sweat to the shapes of their bodies. The pub wouldn't have smelled old then. It would have stunk like a pigsty.

Not one of Dan Stott's pigsties, of course. Dan held to the tenet that a clean pig was a happy pig. No doubt he knew whereof he mucked; at least Dan's pigs always appeared happy enough. What the hell was keeping Dan, anyway? Where was Tim? Where was the publican? Where was anybody?

Great balls of fire, where was Peter Shandy? Gradually, without his knowing when or how, Peter's feet had moved from ancient oak planking to forest floor. This had never, not possibly, been anything other than forest floor. The trees around him had roots as big around as beer kegs, knotted into the earth like giant hawsers, as they needs must be to hold upright the incredible trunks growing from them.

There was a simple explanation for this phenomenon, Peter thought. He was drunk. No, that wouldn't work. He still hadn't laid eyes on the bartender, let alone got

his pint. He'd fallen asleep, that was it. He'd succumbed to jet lag and the backlash from Professor Pfylltrydd's learned discourse. Or maybe he'd hypnotized himself staring at those shiny pump handles.

No matter. Tim and Dan would come along and rouse him as soon as they'd finished whatever was taking them so long back there. In the meantime, he might as well relax and enjoy his nap.

It felt strange to know he was asleep, yet not feel the least bit sleepy. But then one usually didn't, in a dream. One didn't always have such powerful tactile sensations, either. Peter slapped at a gnat that was lunging on his cheekbone, and made blasphemous utterance as he banged his toe on one of those mammoth tree roots.

It was odd that his toe hurt from the banging, come to think of it. He'd put on his heavy work boots when they'd got into the Fiat. Peter looked down at his feet and saw he was wearing primitive buskins made of roughly shaped leather drawn up over his feet like the dough around an apple in a dumpling. Thongs were laced across the tops and around his ankles to keep them on.

Well, such things happened in dreams. He ought to be grateful he was having this relatively innocuous excursion around the fringes of the subconscious instead of the recurring nightmare in which he'd find himself lecturing to a crowded classroom, stark naked except for a giant hogweed stuck Hawaiian-style behind his right ear. Or was it the left ear? One side meant, "Come to me, beloved," the other meant, "Sorry, my wife won't let me," but he couldn't remember which was which.

That came from his having been driving on the wrong side of the road all afternoon, he supposed. It wouldn't have mattered in this particular dream, anyway. He'd been more concerned about such niceties back in the pre-Helen period when he'd got more deeply involved with a biologist from Amherst than he'd meant to. Christabel, her name was.

How in Sam Hill had Christabel snuck into his dream, anyhow? Drat it, the Randy Shandy of yore was a respectably married man now. Peter wished Helen would manifest herself instead. He liked dreaming about Helen. He couldn't think of much about Helen that he didn't like, except that he was here and she was—where? In some quaint olde worlde teashop by now, scoffing up scones with Iduna, while he was being led up the forest path by an overexcited id. Why the flaming perdition didn't Tim and Dan come along and wake him up?

Maybe they'd decided he needed his rest, and left him to slumber among the beer pumps while they quaffed their restoratives. No, they wouldn't have allowed him to

remain draped over the bar for some wandering professor to see and to deride. They'd have dragged him over and laid him down on one those oaken benches so picturesquely hollowed by so many generations of bucolic buttocks.

His wisest course might therefore be to select a likely root and lie down upon it, perhaps conjuring up a few robins to cover him with leaves for added comfort. Then he could dream himself to sleep so that he could wake up on all levels of consciousness at once, and get the show back on the road.

Why couldn't he have simply dreamed himself out into that fine stand of hogweed? He could have got in a spot of preliminary investigation and saved himself some time. Peter could see no hogweed around here, wherever here might be. Too shady, no doubt. It was going to be a howling shame to cut down such noble trees as these. They'd have to go sometime, though, so the land could be cleared for farming. He hoped he'd wake up before that happened.

Peter was getting concerned about his companions. Dan Stott, to be sure, had *festina lente* engraven on his backbone, but Tim was brisk enough. Unless his mind wandered to trace elements. Cripes, if Dan had got to ruminating and Tim to pondering the subtler nuances of boron in the beet fields again, he could be stuck in this imaginary forest till the cows came home.

Assuming there were any cows to come. So far, Peter had seen no sign of life except that one gnat, which he'd swatted out of whatever existence it might have been supposed to possess. He was getting lonesome. Maybe that dream about the roomful of snickering students would have been preferable, after all. Why didn't something happen?

Chapter 2

HIS GRANDMOTHER HAD ALWAYS said it wasn't safe to wish for anything because if you did, you might get it. Shandy was kicking petulantly at a root, bemoaning like Arthur Guiterman's cam-u-el his too-distinguished onliness, when he got poked in the chest by a harp.

"What the hell?" was his natural reaction.

"Oh, sorry." Above the twanging of agitated harp strings, the apology came loud and clear. "Force of habit."

The speaker was, as perhaps Peter might have expected, a giant. A mere stripling among giants, to be sure: probably not more than seven feet in height and a paltry yard or so across the shoulders. Still, this was an impressive enough giant to dream up on one's first try. Peter Shandy would not have wanted a larger giant. He wasn't at all sure he wanted this one.

However, the giant's not uncomely countenance looked amiable enough, not to say contrite. "'Tis this goddamn enchantment I be under," he was explaining. "I haven't got used to traveling without my lance. I mean, ye meet a wizard, it's ye customary etiquette of ye geste to ram ye old lance tip up against his tabard and make him confess what he hath been up to. Ye blasted wizards be always up to something."

He straightened the wreath of giant hogweed that had slid cockeyed on his flowing golden locks, hitched up the skirt of his white robe to scratch a thigh the size of an oak bole, and sighed. "I forget what ye protocol be for a bard in a situation like this. Ye wouldn't happen to recall, I misdoubt me?"

"Sorry," Shandy answered. "I'm a—er—stranger here, myself. Do I gather you are in fact a knight errant who's been turned by some form of necromancy into a traveling poet?"

"Urrgh," said the giant. "I hight Torchyld y Dewr. Highted, I mean, until this morning. I wot not what I hight now. Torchyld yr Anobeithiol, perchance."

"Too bad," Shandy replied, knowing somehow that the former meant The Intrepid and the latter meant The Hopeless. "Not about the Torchyld part, I mean. Torchyld's a first-rate name. I know somebody with a name very much like it. As a matter of fact, you remind me—"

"Arrgh!" the giant interrupted. "Never mind that. Ye be supposed to tell me how ye hight. I remember that much anyway."

“So I am. Well, I—er—hight Peter Shandy. Actually I’m not a wizard. I’m a professor.”

“A what?”

“A—er—teacher.”

“Oh, a druid. Why saidst ye not so in ye first place? Dost ken any poetry?”

“Quite a lot, as a matter of fact. Have you heard the one about the young lady of Niger who smiled as she rode on a tiger?”

Torchyld clearly had not. Nor, as Shandy realized a few syllables too late, would he be likely to know the meaning of either Niger or tiger. The sample had been ill-chosen. But why did the giant have to cry about it? For crying, Torchyld incredibly was.

“Dash it all,” snapped Shandy, “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. Here, take my handkerchief and blow your nose, like a good chap.”

It was then that he became aware he no longer possessed a handkerchief, nor a pocket to carry one in. Like the enchanted warrior blubbering before him, he was wearing a longish robe of what might in a romance be described as fairest white linen. To Peter it looked coarsely woven, badly wrinkled, and none too clean.

As for the handkerchief, Torchyld wouldn’t have known that word either, and didn’t appear to be interested. He merely sniffed a mighty snuffle and ignored the tears on his cheeks, this being evidently some kind of Golden Age when a man didn’t have to go around acting manly if he didn’t happen to feel like it.

“I weep for ye Lady Syglinde,” he explained with simple dignity. “Ye being a druid and therefore possessed of unbounded wisdom, I perceive a kindly spirit hath set me in thy way, that I may unto thee my woeful tale unfold. Prithee haul up a root and ease thy feet. This may take a while.”

“I’m in no hurry,” said Peter, draping his laundry more snugly about him and settling into the shade of a giant oak. Tim and Dan must be just about getting to work on their second pints by now, so he might as well nap a while longer. This dream was beginning to liven up.

“Okay, shoot. That is—er—unfold thy tale. What happened to Lady Syglinde? Did she get enchanted, too?”

“My Syglinde be herself an enchantment,” Torchyld groaned. “Forsooth, had it not been for that old hag Dwydd, we should e’en now be wending our way to the battlements, thereon to plight our troth. Syglinde and I spend quite a lot of time plighting our troth,” he admitted with what might in a less awesome figure have been

described as a boyish grin. “At least we did, until Ffyffnyr disappeared.”

“You did say Ffyffnyr?”

“In sooth,” Torchyld replied in some surprise. “So did ye also. Why not? That be his hight.”

“Yes, but who is he?”

“Meseemed ye druids be supposed to wot this stuff. He be my great-uncle Sfyn’s pet griffin.”

“Drat it, you can’t expect me to remember the name of every griffin that comes flapping along,” said Peter testily. “We druids have far weightier matters to occupy our minds. What’s so special about Ffyffnyr?”

“He be not a bad old scout, as griffins go. Great-uncle Sfyn hath him trained to roll over and play enchanted, sit up and beg for boiled eels, give ye his talon, all kinds of cute tricks. And when ye throne room groweth too cold, Ffyff can always breathe fire and warm ye place up.”

“M’yes, I see. A comforting sort of beast to have around, no doubt. You spoke of a throne room. Your great-uncle would then be King Sfyn?”

“Aye, so he be. And I be his great-nephew and Syglinde his ward. She and I had it all fixed up we were going to get wedlocked and build ourselves a cozy little castle with our own portcullis, and settle down to raising eels in ye moat and *digrifwvch* in ye royal chamber.”

Shandy didn’t have much trouble figuring out *digrifwvch*, either. “Your own castle, eh? Then you’re not in line to inherit your great-uncle’s kingdom?”

“Nay, druid, I be only—let’s see.” Torchyld tried counting on his fingers, but gave it up as a bad job after two. “To begin with, there be his sons, Prince Edmyr, Prince Edwy, and Prince Edbert. My father was King Sfyn’s nephew Lord Edolph, but *taddi* got eaten by a garefowl one day when he was out hunting sea monsters. Or perchance it was ye other way around. My mother was never clear as to ye details. She wasted away.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.”

“Gramercy, druid. Where was I? Oh yes. After my uncles there be Uncle Edmyr’s son Dagobert. He be ye crown prince now. His brother Dilwyn used to be, but Dilwyn perished at ye last new moon of a surfeit and bloody flux. Then there be Edwy’s son Owain, and Edbert’s sons Gelert and Gaheris. Those be all my cousins. Ye legitimate ones, anyway. The rest count not. There be female cousins, too, but they also count not in terms of ye succession. My aunts be always nagging me to marry one of ye girls

now that I be rich and famous.”

“Are you, forsooth?”

“Forsooth, verily. Wist ye not? I be he that slew ye wyvern. See ye, this wyvern gan laying waste ye countryside, kidnapping fair maidens and whatnot. Eftsoons ye wyvern gan carrying off sheep, too. So then something had to be done. So I did. So I made claim to ye wyvern’s hoard.”

Shandy had been under the impression it was dragons that had hoards, but perhaps a wyvern counted as a kind of dragon. He thought he would not raise the question. No doubt druids were supposed to know all about wyverns, too.

“Ah, yes,” he said briskly. “Speaking of wyverns, let’s get back to Ffyffnyr.”

“Ffyffnyr be a griffin.”

“So you’ve already informed me. The difference being that a wyvern has only two front legs, the hinder part of its body being serpentine in form. A griffin is just an ordinary, run-of-the-mill quadrupedal cross between a lion and an eagle. With wings, needless to say. Both are members of the genus *Bestialis mythicus*.”

“I wot not of learned tongues,” Torchyld answered rather sulkily. “Hast ever slain a wyvern with a disenchanting sword and two stale biscuits, druid?”

“No, I can’t say I have,” Shandy admitted. “Nor should I care to try. That must have been a feat unparalleled for valor, not to mention agility and resourcefulness. You used the biscuits as bait, I assume?”

“Nay,” quoth Torchyld. “I but stood waiting till he got close and opened his jaws to devour me. Then I chucked ye biscuits down his gullet and rammed them into his windpipe with ye point of my sword. So when he tried to breathe fire at me, he backfired and fried his own gizzard.”

“Good Lord!”

“Well may ye say so,” Torchyld replied with a self-satisfied smirk. “Ye accursed sword was otherwise useless. I had essayed to hew him in twain with one blow as is my wont, but ye damned blade wouldn’t even cut through ye first layer of scales. Baleful Dwydd had cast an evil spell on it and had not e’en shown ye courtesy to taunt me with her perfidy as I was setting off on my geste. She but handed me ye biscuits with a fiendish leer, and went flapping off to her turret.”

“This—er—Dwydd lives right in King Sfynd’s castle?”

“Aye, verily. Ye can’t have a castle without a wicked hag roosting in one turret or another, ecod. It be not ye done thing. Syglinde and I had been wondering where we could find one for our own love nest. ’Tis a job to tax a wizard, tracking down a really

rotten beldame these days, I tell ye. Most hags be but mean-tempered because the damp getteth into their aged bones and they lack a pet griffin to keep them warm. Syggie said perchance we might take in some poor soul who needeth a home and make believe she be evil. What difference? All this keeping up with ye Penjoneses can be carried too far, meseems.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Shandy told him. “Perhaps you and Lady Syglinde can start a fashion for keeping a good hag instead of a bad one.”

“And why think ye I shall ever get a chance to start anything?” Torchyld snarled. “Gin I fail to get Ffyffnyr back, I be forever banished from the kingdom and Great-uncle Sfyn will marry off my darling Syglinde to yon scurvy, stinking, caitiff louse Owain.”

“Your cousin Owain is also interested in your—er—much-betrothed?”

“She dealt him perforce a lusty buffet with a trencherful of boiled eels but four e’ens agone. Great-uncle Sfyn nigh brast a gut laughing.”

“Then what are you blethering about? Lady Syglinde is obviously a young woman who knows how to handle herself in a clinch. And if the king is so partial to Owain, why would he have laughed?”

“It was funny,” Torchyld replied. “I laughed, also. Then I wrapped a brace of eels around Owain’s neck and stuffed their tails down his ugly throat and made him eat them or choke. He broke out in spots next morning. Boiled eels always give Owain spots. Great-uncle Sfyn was still laughing about ye spots, until he found out Ffyffnyr was agone.”

“How did Ffyffnyr go?”

“How should I know, prithee? He went. One minute he was there trying to sneak a boiled eel off the banqueting board. The next minute he was gone. Poof.”

“You observed this poof? That is to say, you actually saw the griffin disappear?”

“How could I? Have I eyes to see what was and is suddenly not? Anyway, I was up on ye battlements at ye time.”

“Getting in a spot of troth-plighting while you were fresh and rested, eh?”

“Nay, I was on guard duty. A castle’s safety rests on its sentries’ eyeballs. We keep aye a sharp lookout for ogres and dragons and marauding armies and suchlike.”

“See many of them around these parts?”

“Off and on. Ye know how it be. Anyway, I was up there keen-eyed and vigilant, setting an example to ye lower ranks according to court protocol and military discipline. Had Ffyffnyr flown off, I could not but have seen him. I saw not, so he hath

not.”

“Was he in the habit of flying off?”

“Nay, Ffyffnyr might take a little spin around ye turrets when he felt ye urge, like any normal griffin, but he cometh always back. Ffyffnyr be no grifflet, ye ken, and he hath been a pet all his life. Great-uncle Sfyn’s own father, Sfynwair ye Compassionate, found him in a cave barely out of ye egg, and brought him back to ye castle for Sfyn to play with. They were babes together, and they’ve grown old together.”

Torchyld began to cry again. “Curses, it rotteth mine guts to think of yon fat old griffin in some ogre’s stewpot, and Great-uncle Sfyn back there alone in ye banqueting hall with his mustache dragging in his metheglin. He be like to pine away without Ffyff, damn it.”

“You don’t suppose that’s what somebody had in mind?” Shandy ventured..

“Ungh?”

“I don’t want to raise unjust suspicions, Sir Torchyld, but might not one of your uncles, to raise a hypothetical question, have a hankering to become king in his father’s stead? After all, if Prince Edmyr, Prince Edwy, and Prince Edbert all have grown sons of their own, as you told me, they can’t be getting any younger themselves. The longer King Sfyn hangs on, the more likely it appears that certain of his heirs could die without ever getting a whack at the throne, doesn’t it?”

“Mine uncles be not magicians,” Torchyld protested. “They be but princes. In sooth, they get fed up now and then. I gainsay ye not that it be possible one of them might wish to hurry Great-uncle Sfyn along a trifle gin he foundeth a chance, but look at ye facts. A mere prince wotteth not to make a griffin go poof. A prince can’t do much of anything except ride off on gesses and rescue beautiful princesses from monsters and evil wizards. My uncles have all been down that road long ago. Bethink ye, once a prince hath rescued one beautiful princess, that first princess be like to wax exceeding wroth gin he goeth off and rescueth another. I know because Uncle Edwy tried it. Aunt Edelgysa found out and beaned him with ye thighbone of a sheep.”

“Gad,” said Shandy. “I hadn’t realized food could be such a dangerous weapon.”

“Did I not tell ye about me and ye biscuits?”

“You did. Now tell me more about Ffyffnyr. Has he any distinguishing features? That is to say,” Shandy amplified since Torchyld looked puzzled at his choice of words, “is he in any way different from other griffins? Aside from being old and fat, that is?”

“He weareth a collar of purest gold, richly engraven and set about with blazing

gems.”

“Excellent. Anything else?”

“He be red.”

“Redder than most griffins, you mean?”

“Redder than any griffin other than he. I wot not what color ye griffins be whence ye cometh, druid, but around here they be mostly brownish yellow with green and purple streaks. Sometimes find we a griffin that be all green or all purple or kind of plaid, but no man ne yet no maid hath ever before nor since found a red one. That be why Sfynwair ye Compassionate kept Ffyff in ye first place. Ffyff waxeth somewhat gray around ye muzzle now, but still gleameth he as red as ye lips of my beauteous Syglinde.”

“You’re not going to cry any more, I hope,” Shandy pleaded. “Try to keep your mind on the griffin. When did you find out he was gone?”

“When ye guards came to seize me.”

“They seized you? Off the battlements, you mean?”

“Nay, druid, I said not they seized me. I said they came to. I tied them together in pairs by ye hairs of ye heads, and dangled them over ye parapet until they changed their minds and let me walk down by myself. So I went into ye great hall and found Great-uncle Sfyn waxing wrother than ever I have seen him wax before. All my aunts and uncles were standing around giving me dirty looks, and Dwydd was hopping and cackling and pointing her finger at me, in accordance with standard court procedure for evil hags. Dwydd wotteth her job, I’ll say that for her. So then everybody started hueing and crying about what had I done with Ffyffnyr. Then I realized Syglinde wasn’t there.”

“Because nobody was getting beaned with a trencher, I suppose?”

“In sooth. So I gan yelling what ye hell were they all yelling about and what had they done with Syglinde? So Uncle Edmyr said never mind Syglinde, where was Ffyffnyr? So I asked him how was I supposed to wot?”

“A reasonable question.”

“So then Dwydd hopped and cackled some more, and ye gist of her cackling was that I had spirited Ffyffnyr away by ye same mystical power I used to kill ye wyvern. That be a lot of dragon feathers and I told them so. But they believed me not.”

“Why, do you suppose?”

“Because Uncle Edmyr and Uncle Edwy and ye rest be ashamed for that they themselves fared not forth to slay ye wyvern, and ye women are ashamed of their men

for being a bunch of *llwfrfryns* but dare not say so. Gin they can all fool themselves into believing I, a mere great-nephew of the king, performed that mighty deed of valor by a cantrip spell instead of with a disenchanting sword and—”

“Two stale biscuits,” said Shandy. “A shrewd observation, Sir Torchyld. So that’s their story and you’re stuck with it.”

“True, O druid. Great-uncle Sfyn commanded me to search ye world over if need be, until I find Ffyffnyr, or ne’er again will I embrace my darling Syglinde. And just as I was leaving, Dwydd slapped this goddamn enchantment on me to make my search impossible. So here I be with no sword, no lance, no horse, nothing but a harp and a tin ear, forsooth. What the *uffern* be I to do?”

“What would you do if you were a real bard?”

“Oh, meseems I would charm ye birds of ye air and ye beasts of ye field and ye minds and hearts of men and women with ye power of my voice and all that *ffolineb*. How do I wot what I would do? I have ne’er been a bard before, and I be not one now. And I be doomed ne’er to betroth my Syglinde again!”

“Drat it,” snapped Peter, “if you don’t quit blubbering, I’ll disenchant you myself.”

“Canst, druid?” Torchyld grabbed his arm in a grip like a griffin’s. “Why said ye not so in ye first place?”

“M’well, frankly, I didn’t mean that in quite the way it came out. That is to say, we druids have to—er—observe the druidical protocol, you know. We can’t simply go around disenchanting people without—er—studying their cases first, you know.”

“Nay, I wot not,” howled the ill-made bard. “I but wot gin ye fail to disenchant me and help me get Syglinde back, I wot to wrap thy neck around thy knees and use ye for a football.”

Chapter 3

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST MIGHT HAVE been interested to learn King Sfyn's great-nephew played football. Peter Shandy was only concerned with whether his oversized new acquaintance really meant what he said. This dream was getting awfully physical.

"Then let's—er—get on with it," he said. "The first thing—"

"Ye first thing be to get rid of this accursed harp," Torchyld interrupted, giving the instrument a contemptuous twang.

"Not on your life. One never knows when one may need a harp."

"What for?"

Peter couldn't think what for, so he put on what he hoped was a profound and druidical expression. Torchyld did have the grace to look somewhat abashed, though he gave the harp another jangle, evoking horrible discords and causing some hitherto silent rooks to begin squawking pettishly in the treetops.

"There, goddamn it," came a voice from somewhere. "I told you we were dead. I hear heavenly harps, and angels singing."

"A malignant shade," cried Torchyld. "Aroint! Aroint!"

"Aroint, hell," bellowed Shandy. "Tim! Hey, Tim! Over this way."

"Pete! Cripes, are you dead, too?"

Timothy Ames could still put on a fair burst of speed for a short sprint. He came bounding down the forest path, followed at a more stately pace by Daniel Stott and his cheese. Both, like Peter, were wearing what looked like bedraggled nightgowns. Both had white coverings over their heads, secured by golden bands around their foreheads. Tim was carrying a ceremonial golden sickle that made him look like Father Time. He caught sight of Peter, glanced back at Dan and down at his own garb, and snorted.

"Damn, I thought this was the pearly gates, but it looks more like an Arab oilmen's convention. Where in hell are we? Or should I rephrase the question?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Peter told him. "All I can tell you is that you appear to have butted into a dream I was having. Happy to have you aboard, of course. Meet Sir Torchyld, an enchanted warrior."

"The devil he is. Who enchanted him?"

Tim moved closer to the giant and squinted upward. He was without his spectacles and hearing aid, no doubt because they would have been out of period with the golden sickle and other accoutrements, but he was managing better than might