

Tales of Ulm from Hester's Hearth

I

Gerrad's Quest

Grace Chetwin



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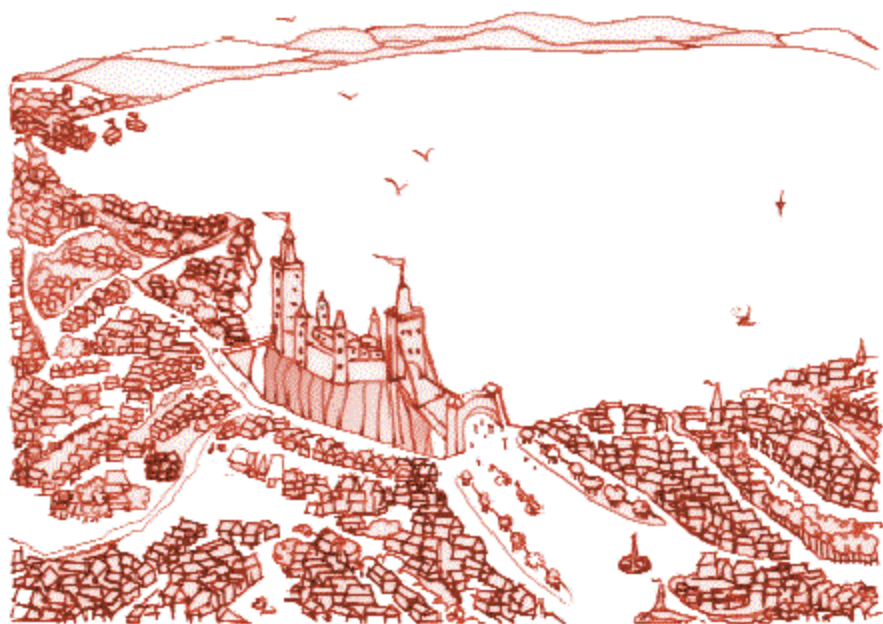
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for Gerrad Hall of Corydon, Indiana
&
Piotr Kosicki of Catonsville, Maryland —
finally

Welcome, children. Hurry in and shut out the cold. Gather round, sit you down by Hester's hearth and hear the tale of Gerrad, Lord Leochtor's son, and what befell him at his First Coming of Age. . . .



Chapter One

Long ago, in the golden days of Ulm, Lord Leochtor ruled our Lakelands and his home was Scandibar, the great rock fortress rising sheer off Langoth's shore. Lake Langoth was—and still is—our largest lake, Pen'langoth our chief city, and Lord Leochtor was as rich and powerful as any king or queen.

Now, as you smallest ones may not know, his son, Gerrad, was born the year after the Battle of Sundor, when Gom the wizard boy saved us from Galt the bad marsh king. Oh, what a victory that was! And the songs they sang of Gom thereafter!

Growing up with those tales, Gerrad couldn't help but feel envious of Gom, for everyone spoke so highly of him, most especially Leochtor. You see, while Leochtor loved Gerrad very dearly, he was very strict, never telling his son what a good clever boy he was or what a fine lake lord he was shaping up to be for fear of giving him a swollen head. Sad to say all he did was make Gerrad feel a failure who would never measure up, and certainly not as a worthy lake lord, as I said.

Lonely, cooped up in that citadel without a single friend his own age,

Gerrad longed at times to leave its walls as Gom had left his home once to find out who he really was and what else he might become. Everyone had expected Gom to be a woodcutter like his father before him, and look! He ended up a wizard, the best in Ulm.

If Gom had found his true place in life, thought Gerrad, why should he not do likewise?

But that was only half of it.

You see, Gerrad thought he already knew what he should do before he even started out and that was to become a wizard like Gom. For Gom had earned Leochtor's highest praise, and Lord Leochtor didn't throw his praise around. Maybe, thought Gerrad, if he learned magic and did some brave deed Leochtor would be proud of him at last.

Now if Gerrad believed he wasn't going to make a good lake lord, you may well ask how could he possibly expect to become something much more difficult like a magical hero? Well, Gerrad wasn't thinking clearly, that's how. He was so fixed on making his father proud of him that reason never entered into it. If he and Gom could only meet, thought Gerrad, Gom was sure to take him off and teach him magic.

Would Leochtor allow it? Of course not! But Gerrad was a dreamer, and this was his dream.

Learning all the sagas and the homely tales meanwhile, Gerrad awaited his big chance to meet Gom. But that chance never came, for in all of Gerrad's eleven years, Gom never once went near Scandibar.

As Gerrad neared his twelfth birthday—the year of his First Coming of Age as you all know—he asked for a state banquet, a very formal, grand affair to which Gom would surely have to come. But on that day of all days Leochtor and his mother, Nasidda, were going to be away on state business.

On his birthday morning, Gerrad stood alone at his turret window, watching the sun come up across the lake and feeling sorry for himself. Nasidda had wanted to take him with them, but Leochtor wouldn't hear of it.

"Gerrad cannot miss his schooling. He'll have his birthday and his

banquet after we return.”

Gerrad sighed deeply. What a dull day this was going to be: no party, no surprises. His only hope was Leth, who’d minded him since he’d outgrown his nurse.

Directly below, rock wall fell sheer into deep water, broken only by a steep stone stair and narrow dock lined with tiny bobbing boats. As he peered down, there came a distant clank of steel: the watch raising the narrow portcullis at the head of the stair—the tradesman’s entrance to the citadel and Scandibar’s back door.

Far out, tiny boats headed home for the Lakeside fishing quarter with a full night’s catch while big brown birds swooped low over the open creels.

“Lucky things,” Gerrad murmured. “You can go anywhere you please, anytime.” Behind him, the door opened and Leth came in with morning tea.

“Happy birthday.” Leth set the tray down with a rattle.

Gerrad saw with disappointment that the servant’s hands were empty. Never mind, he told himself. Leth’s waiting for the right moment. He always seemed to know what to give and when to give it. The year before, when Gerrad had worked so hard with his bow, Leth had presented him with a pack of arrows that flew to their mark as swift and true as any hawk.

All the way through breakfast, though, Leth scarcely said a word. Now this was strange, for he usually brought all the latest kitchen gossip. Gerrad studied the man’s bent head. Was he ill? Hard to tell. Leth’s long jowls had a natural sag, and the deep-set eyes were always pouchy.

Gerrad set down his fork. “What’s wrong?”

Leth looked up, frowning. “Nothing you can fix, I fear. Eat up and go to your lessons. I promised your father there’d be no slacking off.”

Gerrad found work hard that morning. He kept thinking of his parents, missing them and at the same time feeling sore that they were gone on such a special day.

Finally, his tutor, Phail, closed their books with a snap. “I cannot

teach an absent mind. Go, amuse yourself elsewhere.”

Left to himself, Gerrad was at a loss. Too late to go out with Rossel the hunt master and Willem the head archer for the party had left at dawn.

He went back to the turret for his noonday meal.

Leth still seemed down. And still no present. What was up? Gerrad tried to think. This was normally Leth’s day off, when he rowed south around the lake to visit with his sister overnight. Was Leth sad at having missed his visit?

“Leth, go and see Marly. You don’t have to stay here on my account.”

For a moment, Leth looked startled. Then he actually smiled. “Here am I, thinking how you’re brooding over what a dismal birthday you’re having, when all the time you’re thinking of me.” His smile faded. “Something is wrong and I can’t make it right. But it’s not Marly and I can’t say what it really is for that would only make things worse.”

Now Gerrad was utterly determined to find out what it was, so he pressed and pressed until at last the man said:

“I met a man in the Lakeside market who told me he had a neckerchief as had once belonged to Gom. I asked to buy it, and he promised to bring it here this very day. But he hasn’t come so now I’ve nothing for you.”

Gom’s neckerchief!

Gerrad pictured Leth meeting the man in the market, a place where the Lakelord’s son would never be allowed to go. Gom had been there many times, had even worked there, helping a tinker mend his pots ...

The loneliness and boredom of the day came crashing full upon him, followed by a sudden, fierce desire.

His chin came up.

“I know what I want instead.”

Leth’s mournful eyes grew sharp. “Oh?”

Gerrad took a breath and plunged.

“Take me out to Lakeside—tonight.”

Chapter Two

Leth looked about to choke. “Lakeside? Are you mad? Why would you want to go to that place?”

“To see The Jolly Fisherman.” The inn where Gom had stayed and where you’d find the folk who really knew Gom, who’d known him long before he became a famous wizard or even one at all. “It’s no big thing, you often go there.”

“No big—” Leth rolled his eyes. “Only worth my hide!”

Gerrad pressed on. “Who’s to know? It’s your day off.”

“*My* day off, exactly,” Leth echoed with emphasis.

“So go and take me with you.”

“And what would your uncle say?” Lugen, Lord High Chamberlain and Leochtor’s second cousin left in charge while the lake lord was away.

Gerrad snorted. “I haven’t seen him since Father left.”

“And how do you get past the sentries?”

“Easy. I’ll . . . disguise myself.”

Leth laughed and shook his head. “You can’t.”

“But I can!” Gerrad insisted eagerly. “I’ll smudge my face, put on old clothes—I’ll be a pantry boy.” As he said it, he got such a rush. His cheeks flushed and his gray eyes sparkled. “And we’ll take the back way and row up the lake, as you always do.”

“Well . . .” Leth began to weaken. “There’s still old Warten. You doubtless think him foolish with his lame jokes but he’s really sharp and he’s been on that back gate forever. If he catches you sneaking out with me, don’t think he’d hesitate to tell and where do you reckon I’ll spend the rest of my days? Down in the dungeons.”

“He won’t know me, he won’t. Oh, please, no one will know,” Gerrad pleaded, but Leth was in full spate now.

“And say you got past him, what if you got hurt? Lakeside is a dangerous place.”

“Hurt? With you?” Gerrad smiled, it sounded so absurd.

Leth shook his grizzled locks firmly now. “No, I can’t, I won’t take such risk.”

“Oh, please. *Please*. It’s what I want most in the world.”

Leth kept right on shaking his head, but he was weakening again. You see, children, he loved that boy as if he were the very own son he didn’t have and Gerrad knew how to play on that. So he kept right on until finally Leth grudgingly gave way. “Oh, all right, I’ll take you—and on my foolish head be it.”

Leth found clothes: shirt, breeches and a hooded jacket several sizes too big for Gerrad, and all so ragged that even the pantry boys had thrown them out.

Gerrad smudged his face with ash from his chamber hearth, thatched up his hair, then, shrugging into his rags, paraded before the glass. “Now let old Warten know me!” he crowed.

Nevertheless, he stumbled nervously as they neared the watchman’s cubbyhole by the portcullis arch. Hood up, shoulders hunched, Gerrad shuffled by at Leth’s heels and was almost through when the watchman called after them. “Hey, Leth!” Gerrad halted, bracing himself. But the old man only added cheerily “So you got out, after all. Made you work

the day through, though. Minding his nibs, eh? I bet he leads you a dance while Pappy's away."

Gerrad frowned. How mean. And disrespectful.

"I daresay you'll not get a full day off now until his lordship gets back," Warten went on. "Ah well, Leochtor's a fair man. He'll make it up to you—and you'll certainly deserve it." The man poked his head through the cubbyhole window, peering round at Gerrad. "Who's he?"

Gerrad shrank from Warten's bony finger.

"New pantry boy. Scully. I'm showing him the Quarter."

Warten grunted. "Staying out all night?"

"Alas, no. Just an hour or two."

"Well, don't forget the gate comes down at twelve sharp," the watch called after them. "One minute late and you'll be sleeping on the dock."

Gerrad ran down to the water, strode along the dock to Leth's small boat, and climbed into his seat, bristling. Lead Leth a dance, indeed! Leth hadn't offered to defend him, he noticed. But as Leth climbed in and lowered himself onto the opposite seat, Gerrad's resentment vanished. "We did it!"

"Mmmm." Leth pushed off from the dock. "Makes me wonder how safe Scandibar really is when anyone can pass through the gate as easily as that."

Wind sliced across the open water, cutting through Gerrad's threadbare coat, making him feel as though he wore none at all. Leth was pulling hard and fast, but they still had a ways to go: a mile, at least, past high cliffs lined with mansions screened by high, leafless trees. Gerrad shuddered, thinking of the same cold journey in reverse.

Leth's chuckle came out of the dark.

"Want to turn back?"

And give up a visit to The Jolly Fisherman, the very inn where Gom had likely left his neckerchief behind? "Not likely! How far is the inn from the boat?"

"A brisk walk through the market and a short way uphill, it'll warm you." Behind Leth's dark shape, distant dock lights pricked the dark.

Those docks would be deserted at that hour, for the day boats had long come in and the night fleet was out on the lake. Gerrad thought how he'd soon be sitting in the inn, listening to the talk and the songs, unnoted and unknown.

"They'll never dream who I am," he said aloud.

"As long as you don't open your mouth."

"What do you mean?" Even as he said it, Gerrad heard himself. These were not the accents of a pantry boy. He thought back to the citadel kitchens and the broad speech flying above the clatter of pots and pans. "How's this?" he demanded, in clumsy imitation. "Is this more like it?"

Now Leth laughed outright. "Just watch and listen, eh?"

Now Gerrad could not see so clearly in the dark the mess of boards and pilings that formed Lakeside. To put it plain, the ancient boardwalk was a long jetty connecting shorter, lower docks on either side like jagged teeth on a two-edged comb. Leth pulled into the end of the outmost dock. While Leth tied up the boat, Gerrad strolled up to a row of tiny huts running down the middle of the dock. Reaching the nearest hut, he rubbed his palm across a grimy window to see what was inside.

"It's just fishing gear. Come on, before we freeze." They climbed an iron ladder up onto the boardwalk. Beside the ladder hung a sign with a barbed fish hook painted on it. Stretching into the distance, more signs on either side marked other docks: a leaping trout, a crayfish, a net, a float, a creel.

Gerrad gazed toward the shore lights, thinking what a long, cold walk they had ahead of them "Do you always tie up this far out?"

"Aye. The nearer docks are always full."

"But I see lots of empty slips."

"Sure you do. They belong to the night fleet."

Reaching the shore, they hurried past the bare stone slabs of the fish mart, through rows of empty booths in the main market place, then up a steep cobbled street until, there, above Gerrad's head swung a creaking inn sign: a blue-clad dancing shape, The Jolly Fisherman.

Gerrad's heart beat faster.

“Can we stay and listen to the songs?” As Gom used to.

“If we find a place to sit. But remember: you’re Scully and you don’t speak a word.”

The inn was packed. Essie the landlady, majestic in an emerald silk gown and bodice sewn with sparkling stones, bustled to and fro serving ale. Gerrad longed to speak with her, to talk of when Gom had stayed there, but she was clearly much too busy even to pass the time of day.

Leth found them space by the parlor fire.

As Gerrad followed Leth across the room, he glanced around nervously to see if he were being watched. To his relief he found not a single eye upon him. Catching sight of himself in a mirror on the wall he was further reassured to see a skinny urchin with grimy, anxious face staring back at him. No reason these boisterous fishermen would even notice he was there.

The air was stifling, and didn’t smell too fresh. But was he not in The Jolly Fisherman, in the very parlor where Gom had sat—maybe on the selfsame bench!

“Is Carrick here?” The tinker who’d sheltered Gom there. If so, his happiness would be complete.

Leth looked around. “I don’t see him. I know he’s in town. He’s likely up in his room.” Having supper in peace and quiet after a hard day’s work mending pots in the marketplace.

Gerrad’s spirits flagged. Not enough now just to be there. Nothing was happening, and he was meeting no one. Worse, the noise and stale air were making him feel sick.

A sudden shout, and scuffling by the door: a big black-bearded rowdy, itching for a fight. Essie was there in an instant, ordering him out. But the burly man resisted. “I got a right.”

“Not in my ale house, you haven’t!” Essie’s voice carried in the sudden hush.

“And who’ll show me the door? I don’t see no redcoats.”

Two fishermen in dungarees stood up. “So what? Blue will do just

fine." They locked the man's arms behind his back and marched him out.

One man spat as Black Beard passed. "Strangers. Got no business here."

"Up to no good," another said. "Slit their gizzards and throw them in the lake. That's how you get rid of vermin."

"Now, now," said Essie, hoisting her loaded tray. "That'd make you the worse. Sit you down and let me get on."

Gerrad, who had perked up at the sudden excitement, glanced to Leth and saw with dismay that he was looking set to leave.

"I'm thirsty. Is there any lemonade?"

"We must go now."

"Please."

Sighing, Leth stood, looking about for a potboy.

Gerrad downed half his drink before he realized how sticky sweet it was. And warm. As he drank, the men started up a shanty so loud and with so many shouts that Gerrad could not make out a word. He put down his glass feeling an urgent need to get outside. "Where's the privy—no, stay and keep our places," he added hurriedly, as Leth made to follow. "I'm twelve now, don't shame me."

Fighting his way out to the inn yard, Gerrad stood in the back porch breathing deeply and waiting for his queasiness to pass. To his right, the wide entrance arch showed a glimpse of street. Way to his left, down the far end of the yard, stable doors stood open, releasing wafts of hay and horse. As Gerrad gazed toward them, a short, portly man appeared in the doorway. Having bedded down his horse, he was checking his purse before going back into the inn.

Suddenly, a tall youth burst through from behind and snatched the purse from the man's hands, knocking him down. In a heartbeat, the thief was through the archway and out.

"Help, my purse!" the man cried.

Gerrad ran to the arch to find the youth racing down the hill toward the marketplace. The man made for the back porch yelling as he went "Help! Help! I'm robbed!" but no one heard over the hubbub within.

Gerrad glanced back, undecided. The thief was getting away. He ought to follow him but what about Leth?

Oh! Oh! What to do?

What would Gom do?

Gerrad took off pell-mell down the cobbled slope.