

# The Silent Wood

A boy was lying on his stomach on the topmost tower of a small, square castle, basking like a lizard in the sun. There was a book open on the lichened stones in front of him, and one slightly grubby finger traced the illuminations on the page. Neither he nor the book were supposed to be there at all, but he had slipped away from his many guardians to lose himself in the enchanted world of *Parsifal* and the Grail quest. When he was done with reading, he would simply doze on in the warm, afternoon sun or look out, lofty as a falcon, over the world that surrounded the castle.

Even from the high tower it was a small enough world, for the castle, the gardens, and the parkland that surrounded it were contained by a high, stone wall. The wall

snaked for miles between the park and the white dusty road, and even the local village lay inside the great, wrought iron gates. Sigismund, for that was the boy's name, couldn't remember the gates opening since the day his father had first brought him to the castle, several years before. He supposed they must open sometimes to let his father's couriers pass, and the merchants who brought luxuries from the capital, but he had never seen it happen, not even when he raced to the top of the tower to watch a departing caravan. There was always something that distracted his attention at the critical moment—or the dust in summer, or snow of winter, would be too thick for him to see the gate at all.

Sigismund could lie for hours watching the road and imagining the long leagues to the capital, with all the towns and great houses, woods and fields along its length. He would daydream of the adventures that might befall a traveler along the way, for there were still tales told of both faie and ogres dwelling in these remoter provinces. Sigismund's tutor, Master Griff, might look down his nose at such tales, but Sir Andreas, the castle steward, would shake his head and say that you couldn't take anything for granted, not in this country. Sir Andreas himself would never say more, but Wenceslas, who worked in the stable and was a particular friend of Sigismund's, said that Sir Andreas's own father had been killed fighting ogres. He too had been the King's steward, and led his men against

the ogres when they began killing travelers and raiding outlying farms.

This story always gave Sigismund a shiver down his spine, because it was both exciting and sad at the same time. He liked to imagine riding out in the same way when he was older, protecting the people from outlaws and monsters, except that in these daydreams Sigismund always overcame his opponents and set any wrongs done to right. His favorite dream, however, was of the day when his father would come riding back from the endless rebellions and outright wars in the southern provinces. Then, thought Sigismund, his eyes half shut against the sun's glare, they would go adventuring together—perhaps along the fabled Spice Road and into the Uttermost East, where dragons flew like silken banners in the noonday sky and men spoke in strange tongues.

He didn't like to think about what would happen if his father never came back, if he was killed fighting in the south. Sigismund supposed that he would have to return to the capital if that happened, and be crowned king in his turn, although he would much rather ride out alone, like Parsifal on the Grail quest. I could be a knight errant, he thought, and make my own way in the world, as princes used to do in the high days of King Arthur—or the Emperor Charlemagne, when Roland held the pass at Roncevalle.

“But not crown princes,” Master Griff had said on the one occasion when Sigismund voiced this dream aloud.

“You’ll find that was only younger sons, even then. The oldest son still had to be responsible and mind the kingdom.”

Thoughts of princes-errant and the Grail quest drew Sigismund’s eyes away from the eastern road to the great Wood that stretched for league on tree-tossed league into the west. Every sort of tale was told about that wood: that it was the home of witches and of faie who would lure the unwary down into their hollow hills. Some stories even said there was a castle hidden deep in the forest, although there were as many tales as there were trees when it came to the nature of the occupant.

One story, usually told in whispers, claimed that the hidden castle was the seat of a powerful sorcerer, another that it belonged to the Queen of the Faie, She-of-the-Green-Gold-Sleeves. There were other tales again that made it a lair of dragons, or basilisks, or trolls that munched on the bones of men. Sigismund had asked Master Griff for the truth of it, but his tutor had shaken his head.

“Trolls that munch the bones of men! You’re getting too old for such stories, Sigismund.” He had squinted out the library window, into the enclosed garden below. “All that is known for certain is that your great-grandfather placed an interdict on the Wood, forbidding anyone to go there. But the reason for the ban was never set down, and now even your father’s Council seems to have forgotten why.” He shrugged. “Yet from what Sir Andreas says, no one in these parts has ever broken it.”

Sigismund wondered whether this meant that something particularly bad had happened in the Wood during his great-grandfather's time, so bad that no one wanted to go there anyway. The old western gate into the castle was long since walled up, but there was still the remains of a road that must have run into the forest once. It was little more than two rutted and stony wheel tracks now, but Sigismund had followed it one day, making his escape from the castle by means of a mossy channel that had once been the moat, and a culvert under the outer wall. The road did not go far, petering out into a bridle path within a few hundred yards of the castle wall, and fading away altogether beneath the forest eave.

It had been very dark and quiet beneath the canopy, a heavy, listening silence. There was no call of bird or insect, no whisper of a falling leaf—not even the wind stirred. Sigismund had felt the fine hairs lifting along his forearms and up the back of his neck, and taken a step back.

“Wise boy.” The voice that spoke was dry as one leaf skeleton settling on another. Sigismund had whipped around, but saw nothing until there was a stirring between two, downbent hazel trees and a crone hobbled out. She must have been gathering firewood along the forest fringe, for there was a load of bundled sticks on her back and she had to twist her head to look at him. Her eyes were sharp and bright as a blackbird's, but sunk into the weathered seams of her face. Sigismund had thought she looked a little like an old tree herself, knotted and twisted with the

years, although she moved more like the blackbird, coming close to him with a light, hopping step.

She was lame, he saw then, that was why she hopped. He stared, half shocked, half delighted, when he saw that she was puffing on a small, flat-bowled pipe. A thread of smoke rose from it, curling into a question mark above the glow of orange embers.

“That load’s too heavy for you, Granny,” he said. “Let me carry it back to the castle, and the stable master will find a donkey to take you both down to the village.”

Light and shadow flickered across the seamed face like sun through shifting leaves, and her laugh was a cackle, dry as her first words. “Ye’ve a kind heart, lad,” she said, “for all yer lordly clothes, but don’t ’ee worrit about Auld ’azel. I’m used to burdens, born to ’em, ’ee might say.” She chewed on the pipe stem, studying him with her head on one side—exactly like a bird, Sigismund had thought, trying not to laugh. “Stay away from t’ wood though, ’ee should.”

“Why?” he asked. “Why shouldn’t I come in here, if I want to?”

Her sidelong look was sly. “Does ’ee want? Ye was goin’ backwards, last I looked.”

Sigismund had flushed then, a slow burn in the region of his ears. “I was surprised,” he said, with dignity. “That was all.”

“Nay,” she contradicted him, around the pipe, “wise.

Forest's dangerous t' likes of 'ee, root an' branch alike." Her voice had changed then, making him think of earth and moss, and the leaves of years lying deep beneath the trees. "E'en yer huntmaster takes his hounds east, or south or north a-ways—no' westward, no' into this wood."

Sigismund had drawn a deep breath in, feeling his eyes grow wide. "So what is in there?" he demanded. "Is it dragons, like they say, or simply basilisks and trolls?"

The crone cackled again. "Nowt simple about basilisks or trolls, lad, not if 'ee meets 'em. This wood's no place for babes, so 'ee get away back to yon cassle. 'Tis close enough t' wood for 'ee, for now."

Afterward, Sigismund was never quite sure how he found himself halfway back to the castle before he realized that he had even turned around. He could feel the old woman's blackbird eyes, but he did not look back. And although he watched for her from his lookout on the tower, he never saw her trudging back beneath the load of firewood. Sigismund spoke to Sir Andreas later, asking him what he knew of a Granny Hazel. The steward shook his head and said she could have been any number of old women in the village. He had paused then, pursing his lips, before adding that he was surprised any of the village women was bold enough to pick up sticks along the forest eave.

Could she have been a witch, Sigismund wondered, thinking about the old tales. He puzzled over the encounter

for a while longer, until Master Griff gave him *Parsifal* to read, and he became immersed in that. But the next time he made his way to the culvert he found a stout metal grill welded across it, and shortly after that the old fruit trees that had grown up against the low, north wall of the castle were cleared away. It was no longer possible for an adventurous spirit to exit the castle by either means, and Sigismund had brooded over this wrong for days. It was one of the reasons he had retreated to the high tower with only *Parsifal* for company, for there he could at least look out at the world he was not allowed to enter.

He should have known better than to tell Sir Andreas about the forest, he decided, staring into the heat shimmer of the afternoon, even if he hadn't mentioned how he got there. It was easy to forget how seriously the castle garrison took the interdict, especially those who had been born and raised in the forest's shadow.

Sigismund remained staring straight ahead for some time, his chin propped on his hands and his eyes fixed on nothing in particular, until he realized that there was a plume of white dust rising beyond the crest of the first low hill, away to the east. He sat up, narrowing his eyes against the glare, and thought that it would take a very large number of horses and vehicles to raise such a cloud, even at the height of summer. His second thought was of his father, and the huge train of courtiers, soldiers, and servants, with all their attendant baggage, that always traveled with him.



His third thought, however, following immediately on the second, was that a king never went anywhere unheralded and his father would have sent messengers on ahead. All the same, the dust cloud signified a large company, which meant someone of note. Sigismund stood up, dusting down his clothes, and decided to investigate. It was easy enough, in the sleepy heat of the afternoon, to slip unnoticed into the stable and saddle his horse. Even the flies buzzing against the stable window seemed slower than usual, a drowsy backdrop to the day. The bay pony, Mallow, who was not as young as she used to be, and getting too small for Sigismund, swished her tail and laid back her ears, just a little, when he came into her stall. Yet despite this initial resistance, she allowed herself to be saddled and led out a side door into the park.

Given the size of the castle grounds, it was some time before they came to the great, wrought iron gates that opened to the outside world. These were locked, as they always were when Sigismund rode that way, but if he reined Mallow alongside and peered through the metal palings, he could see the cavalcade coming down the road toward him. The summer dust spread out behind it in a white haze, smothering the briar hedge in the ditch beside the road.

A pennant flew above the cavalcade, but although Sigismund narrowed his eyes he could not make out the device on the sky blue background—but there was a

golden plume on the pennant bearer's horse and gold embroidery on its saddlecloth, which swept almost to the ground. There were lancers too, riding in step, and the bright sunlight danced on their polished breastplates and glittered on their lanceheads. Sigismund stared, surprised by their presence, then reflected that this was a remote corner of the world, and there was the forbidden Wood. A great lord or lady of the court might well think an armed escort necessary.

He wondered, his knee pressed hard against a metal paling, whether the noble visitor was coming to see him, perhaps with a message sent by his father—but again dismissed the idea after brief reflection. He was sure that a message heralding their arrival would have been sent in advance, just as if his father himself had been arriving.

There was a traveling coach behind the lancers, with a sky blue body beneath the film of white dust, and great, yellow wheels. Another pennant fluttered from its roof, but the device still eluded Sigismund's gaze. It needed a breeze, he thought, to lift the pennant and spread it out for all the world to see. But there were six white horses pulling the coach, with a postilion in a blue coat riding the leader, and these horses too had nodding golden plumes and gold medallions on their harness that gleamed in the sun. They stopped with a great tossing of heads and pawing of hooves when they drew abreast of the gate, and the whole cavalcade behind them, the wagons and packhorses, and a

second company of lancers in the rear, all came to a trampling halt.

Sigismund turned Mallow away from the gate, then brought her round again so that he could look directly into the coach, but a servant had already let down the steps and was holding the door as a lady got out. Sigismund stared at her, for she did not seem like a real flesh and blood person, but like an icon wrought in gold and precious stones, or someone's dream of a great lady of the court. He felt a little dizzy as she walked toward him, and he could hear the buzz of flies from the stables again, a confused, haphazard spiral in his head. The sound of bees along the briar hedge was a slow drone.

The lady's face was hidden by her wide-brimmed hat with its extravagant swirl of white plumes, but Sigismund could see the fall of golden hair across one shoulder. Her dress was of sapphire blue silk, and her gloves were stitched with gold thread and extended halfway up her arms. Sigismund thought, seeing her hair and her graceful step, that she must be young, but when she was close enough for him to see her face, he was not so sure. It was unlined, that face, smiling and very fair, with eyes as blue as cornflowers, but he did not think she was young—not in the way that Annie, who dusted his room in the castle and giggled a lot, was young.

Sigismund swung down from saddle and bowed, lower than was required from a king's son, and the lady's smile

deepened. She held out her gloved hand, touching his fingers through the gate.

“Hello, chance met stranger,” she said, and her voice was sweet and clear as a note struck on crystal. Sigismund blinked.

“I am the Margravine *zu Malvolin*,” the lady continued, “and I believe we have lost our way. I am looking for the road to Westwood village, for I have inherited a little castle called Highthorn, which is located nearby.”

Sigismund realized that his fingers were still resting against hers, and withdrew them. He blinked again, trying to clear the slight buzzing in his head, and waved a hand toward the distant forest. “You are on the right road, madame. The Wood itself lies over there, but the town called Westwood is located some ten leagues further on.” He frowned, concentrating. “It has a market square and a town charter, but I didn’t know there was a castle there.”

The Margravine laughed, a clear tinkle against the sleepy air. “Oh no,” she said, and just for a moment she did seem like Annie. “It is not a four-square castle like this one, and not nearly so large either—just a little jewel of a place with two towers, very graceful and white.” She smiled. “More like a pagoda, one would say, with a draw-bridge that is always down, and a moat with swans.”

A vision of it swam before Sigismund’s eyes like a mirage. He could see the swans amidst the water lilies, both floating on the still water. “I should like to go there,” he said, and meant it.

The Margravine reached her gloved hand through the gate and tapped Sigismund, very lightly, on the cheek. Her voice was tender, almost caressing. "Of course you would, and why not? It is the most beautiful place in the world." She withdrew her hand and placed one fingertip against her lips, casting down her eyes in apparent thought. When she looked up again it was swiftly, catching Sigismund's eyes with her own. They were like a blue pool at the heart of a quiet wood, he thought, you could drown in them.

There was something about that thought, the recollection of a wood that was not just quiet but still as death, that made him draw back. It was so hot that it was difficult even to breathe, but he could hear shouts and the thud of horses' hooves in the distance, telling him he had been missed. The Margravine appeared to hear it too, for the cornflower eyes looked past him as if she could see the riders coming.

"Ah well," she said, and the caressing note was back. "Perhaps another time." Her eyes lingered on him. "But then again, perhaps not. I will give you a talisman, just in case."

She drew off her glove and slid a ring from her finger, three strands of yellow gold woven tight around a blue jewel. The jewel made Sigismund think of water in the hot, stone courtyards of the south where he had spent his early years: royal blue beneath a web of light.

"A gift," the Margravine said, "to remember me by." And she laughed her tinkling laugh.

Sigismund shivered as his fingers reached for the ring. He thought that a cold wind must have sprung up or a cloud covered the sun, and he looked around, brushing a hand across his eyes to clear them. He saw someone through the blur of sweat, standing in the long shadow cast by the gate. For a moment Sigismund thought it was the crone, with her head twisted up beneath her load of sticks. But then his vision cleared, and he realized that the silhouette was in fact slim and very straight. It was hard to see through the sun's dazzle, but Sigismund had an impression of bare dusty feet beneath a ragged kirtle, centered in the pool of shadow. A village girl—but what, he wondered, would she be doing outside the gate?

He wiped his eyes again and tried to focus, but the girl had vanished. The Margravine did not seem to have noticed anything, but she started slightly as a flock of sparrows rose up, out of the ditch, and darted between her outstretched hand and the gate. The ring dropped sparkling into the dust, and Sigismund thought the lady frowned—but then she was smiling again as she stooped to pick it up. For a moment she stared down at the blue jewel in her hand, her gaze searching, intent, before she shrugged and turned away.

The thudding hooves were louder now, and very close. Sigismund could hear voices, calling his name, but he did not turn or call back to them, just stared at the Margravine as she stepped back into her blue and yellow coach.

“Until later then,” she said over her shoulder, as the plumed hat dipped through the door. A gloved hand waved in farewell. “We will meet again. I am sure of it.”

He was still standing there, staring after the coach, when Sir Andreas and the guard galloped up. The cavalcade did not seem nearly so long as it had before, and the last lancers were just disappearing around the bend in the road as the castle horses slid to a halt, sweating and blowing from the speed of their run.

“Who was that?” Sir Andreas demanded, quick and sharp. “Did anyone speak to you? What did they say?”

But Sigismund could only shake his head. His tongue felt swollen and too thick for speech, and the buzzing of the flies was louder and more frenzied than before.

“He seems dazed,” the guard captain said. “It must be from the sun, coming out in this heat without a hat.”

“Or gloves,” Sir Andreas said, frowning, for a horseman always wore gloves.

“It’s alright,” said Sigismund, enunciating each word with great effort, “my hands are quite cold.” And he slumped to the ground at their feet.