



The Kind Gods

A Short Story by Carolyn Kephart
First published in *Bewildering Stories*

They rode light, for these had long been times of peace, yet still they rode armed from old habit, in steel-studded leather many times mended, battered greaves over scuffed boots, vambraces scored from years of sword-blows. Still, the metal gleamed, and the tough hide was supple, and from a distance they seemed young men, straight and easy in the saddle. Only a closer look would note their greyed hair, and faces as weathered as their gear.

Emerging from the forest, the four soldiers entered a wide field where tall pale grasses glowed in the crisp light of a fine fall afternoon. In the midst of the field rose an abrupt little hill, their destination. They had been friends since boyhood, and later comrades in war, always ready with a jest to lighten harsh odds or to add more merriment to a victory; but their mood this day was quiet. One of them began a song that the others joined in, and its cadences meshed with the jingling of harness, the clinking of steel, the grass-softened thud of cantering hooves—not a full-throated war-cry, but the kind of ballad sung after a battle around embered fires of quiet camps, meant to soothe wounds and weariness and sorrow.

They halted at the foot of the hillock, and the leader of the company dismounted with grace only a little stiff, moving with just a hint of a limp as he began to climb the slight slope. His companions hastened to aid him, but he waved away their help. For a moment he was silent, looking from one comrade's face to the next; and then he smiled faintly as he turned to gaze around him at the field, ending at the mound's rise. "Rest awhile. I won't be long."

He turned and went alone upward, his breath laboring harder with every step he took. When he at last reached the summit, he removed his helm as he slowly fell to his knees, his chest heaving awhile before he ungloved to caress the grass with a battle-scarred hand.

"I told you I'd return," he said, and his damp gray braids brushed the grass as he bowed his head in greeting. "I didn't think it'd take me thirty years. Remember when all this field was flat? Perfect for a fight it was. Many an arrowhead and blade-shard they struck that wrought this mound at my order, for your sake."

He lifted his eyes and squinted far, over the wide meadow and into the past. Memory made him grimace, sharpening his face's lines and seams, as his fingers slid over a deep crease in his brow. "It was almost me under this earth, not you. I've never fought that hard before or since. The bards still sing of you and me, when the priests aren't around to stop them."

He took a flask from his belt, removed its stopper and lifted it to the sun now slipping down toward the trees, murmuring words of ancient prayer. Then he poured a drop of its contents on the ground.

“Here. Drink with me. It can’t harm you.”

His thoughts drifted to the day of that battle, when he and all his friends were alive and young and strong, fighting to the death for a world in peril. Slitting his eyes against the keen radiance of the cloudless sunset, he again saw the field’s tall grasses trampled into blood-muck, churning and darkening with battle, heard the stray sweet birdsongs twisted into clamors and yells. Again he heard the shouts, and the clash of swords. His heart raced, awakening his body’s sickness, and he clenched his teeth to quiet a groan of pain lest his men hear. A slight sip of the flask eased him, and he was able to speak again, although haltingly.

“I don’t have long. I’m rotting inside. My sons wish me gone, and I’m going—but I’m dreading it. In my prime I never feared dying, but it’s different now. There’s a new god now since you and I fought, that’s killed off all the ones you and I knew. There’s a new heaven too, but no one fights or drinks there; all they do is sing. The new hell’s all torture, and that’s where most people end up, it seems. Not much to look forward to, either way.”

He sighed, and murmured an oath now obsolete. “It’s a better world now, but I don’t belong in it. You were lucky, to die while the old gods still lived. I’ve broken all of the new god’s laws in my time, and I won’t be up in the clouds howling hymns, oh no. I’ll be deep in what those smooth-faced priests call the Pit, frying in flames. And you’ll never get your revenge...”

As he said those last words a long fierce growl of thunder seemed to make indignant answer, strange in a cool autumn sky without a single cloud. The thane blinked, for though the potion in the flask was strong, he knew he hadn’t taken enough of it to mislead his senses. After a long moment he put his hand to the ground again as if testing for a heartbeat, his scarred fingers trembling.

“Did they die indeed, the old gods?” he whispered. “Tell me.”

Something lightly tapped his shoulder as soon as he spoke, and he looked around to find a fallen leaf in the grass, red as blood, shaped like a spear-head. No wind had blown it there. He took it up by the stem, and it quivered in his fingers as his heartbeat quickened until he barely had breath to speak again.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered, his eyes on the last of the sun now vanishing amid the grasses. “I’ve missed the world we had. The gods that forgave us...”

All the wounds he had known in all his life seemed to ache anew, and he shivered. But then the sharp air of the oncoming night seemed to warm around him, and some unseen presence bade him turn around. There in the deep blue of the cloudless sky he saw the full moon rising like a great shield of gold, dented by countless blows; and he understood.

A long while he watched the radiant orb as he listened to the voices of his friends, who waited for him at the foot of the mound.

“Soon, lads,” he whispered. “Soon.” And he lifted high the silver flask in honor of his buried enemy before drinking it empty.

As night came on, the old warrior’s lieutenant climbed the barrow, and found his lord lying as if asleep. Seeking a pulse, he found none; and taking up the flask he scented what it had held, and nodded in resignation. He called the others to the mound’s top, and they came with lighted torches to bear witness to the thane’s passing.

“The new god was kind to him,” one of them said at last, who had been his lord’s messenger during the wars. “A quiet death, without suffering. He deserved it.”

The lieutenant gently placed the red leaf on the thane's unbreathing breast, and spoke in a voice unsteadied by sorrow, and by anger too. "No. He should have died fighting sword against sword with he that lies below, while he was young. While the old gods yet lived."

The thane's standard-bearer bowed his head in assent, and his reply was bitter. "We all should have."

A long silence followed those words. But then youngest of the three, who had been the chief's squire since boyhood and whose hair was not yet wholly gray, made a swift silencing gesture. "Wait. Listen."

The noise came again: a faint rattling, very close.

"A viper," the lieutenant said, scanning the grass as he drew his dagger.

The standard-bearer shook his head. "No. It's...under the ground."

Each man froze, listening to the strange rippling clatter deep in the barrow, and the squire spoke again, barely a whisper. "Bones..."

It sounded like a skeleton slowing coming to life. The thane's body lay motionless and silent, but the red leaf twitched as two muffled voices issued from deep within the mound, both of them taut and harsh with anger; both the voices of young men in the prime of their strength. Then the clash of edged steel mingled with the curses and taunts and yells, and the noise went on for the space of several breaths before ebbing into the darkness.

Slowly the thane's men looked around at one another, at first in disbelief, then in wonder, then in joy. All that night they kept vigil with their lord, their eyes and weaponry glinting by moonlight and firelight as they recalled his deeds with glad laughter, and drank to the gods still among them.



The mound was opened in days to come, so that the old warrior might be laid to rest next to his enemy, as he had wished. The priests noted in their chronicles that within the crypt was found a trove of precious goods, and the remains of a tall well-shaped warrior clad in magnificent armor, his skull still covered with skeins of long yellow hair. But only the bards told of how all the treasures seemed disordered and scattered, and how the skeleton seemed to be rising, clutching its great sword two-handed as if parrying a hard slash, and how it seemed to grin in fierce delight.

The thane's men restored the treasures to their places, and reverently arrayed the remains so they lay at rest once more. As they covered their lord's body with a rich grave-cloth, they observed that his lips seemed to shape a smile at the last; and they smiled as well.

When the tomb was sealed once more, the priests of the new god placed a solemn curse upon the barrow and the land about it, and no one dared come near the place thereafter. In time, forest claimed the grass, and thicket grew to cover the grave; but old believers knew that ever afterward on the first full moon of autumn, one might hear the wild din of battle, buried deep beneath the thorn-clad mound.



With thanks to the musical group Fleet Foxes for their 2008 'Tiger Mountain Peasant Song,' which inspired this story.

Other works by Carolyn Kephart:

WYSARD and LORD BROTHER: Parts One and Two of the Ryel Saga,
acclaimed epic fantasy

QUEEN OF TIME – Contemporary magic realism

PENTANGLE: FIVE POINTED FABLES – Short fiction previously published in ezines,

plus a bonus tale:

The Kind Gods

Regenerated

The Heart's Desire

Last Laughter

Everafter Acres