

GREEN IN HIGH HALLACK

by

Kiel Stuart

Tymmons first came upon the beast as he foraged the woods for food.

Crops were bad this year; many things that had seemed to start blooming strong and free withered later on the vine or rotted in the ground. An odd year; first the strangers tramping through (messy people!) leaving their trash everywhere. Then the widespread crop failure. Auntie Roon had taken one of the sheep that very morning to be killed for food. A ram, he remembered. Wouldn't make sense killing a good milk ewe.

Tymmons poked a toe into a rotting log, breathing deeply the forest smell. He didn't mind foraging. The wild beasts knew where everything was that could be good to eat. All one had to do was follow.

He was always careful not to take too many berries or mushrooms or greens from one place. The little beasts needed to live, too. Everything lived in balance, had purpose.

Aha! A flash of cerulean wings and the rusted-hinge call told him that here was a blue sentinel. And where a blue sentinel was, dewberries were never very far.

If only they weren't guarded by so very many long, sharp thorns . . .

Tymmons gingerly parted the tangle to insinuate himself through the berry bush. The tiny blue sentinel would

already be stuffing its crop with gleaming purple fruit. He lifted his basket, looped it over one arm, looked up, and gasped.

Oh, it was beautiful.

It was something like a horse, but not exactly. Its hide shone the color of red earth loved by painters and potters, the hue of bricks lazily in the sun. Its sleek belly was the white of goat's-cream, and from a topknot of hair on its brow sprang a curving, jewel-bright horn.

It stood before him, snorting, entangled in the bush's long runners. Blood welled from scratches on its breast.

Tymmons cast his gaze about, searching for a tool, for some help to free the beast, all the while standing quiet and talking quiet, so that it would not fear him. The bush lay in shadow, but Tymmons was close enough to see the greenish undertone in the beast's large dark eyes. He slowly put down his basket; the beast followed his movement and then looked back into his eyes. It could not be made more plain if it had spoken aloud: Well? What now?

What now, indeed? Tymmons took a deep breath, held it, released it with a whoosh that ruffled his own forelock. Then he inched closer to the big beast, moving aside the spurred branches and runners, slowly freeing first the long legs, then the two-colored body. It was tangled, mostly, and not much cut up, having only been pierced by the thorns in that one spot on its breast. It meant, Tymmons thought, the beast did not struggle or thrash once caught. It meant intelligence.

"Here. Be steady. You will have your freedom in no time," said Tymmons, moving to pry away the last clinging branches. The beast whickered gently.

"You must have a name," the boy said softly, working the thorns out of its breast. He thought a minute, licking his lips in concentration. "Your name will be . . . Camryn."

He felt Camryn's warm breath tickling the back of his

neck. The hairs around the beast's muzzle were like fine bristles.

When Camryn was free, they stood blinking at one another. "Well," said Tymmons. "Well." He peered up through the overlying branches, noting how the sun had dipped. Freeing the beast had taken up a great deal more time than it had seemed. Long past the hour to head back home.

"Come," he said to Camryn, holding away some of the more recalcitrant branches. The heavy body moving broke the woods-silence with crackling twigs underneath crimson hooves.

Tymmons picked up his basket and looked once more at the position of the sun. Only a handful of berries and some mushrooms, separated by a layer of leaves. Not much for all the time he'd spent. He would see what could be gathered on the way back. Better to skirt the deep forest, because it looked like the beast was set on following him.

Even skirting the worst and deepest of the woods, it was slow going. Camryn stopped every once in a while, twisting his long neck to lick at the thorn-wounds.

"Wait," said Tymmons, setting the basket down, and Camryn waited.

Remarkable animal, he thought, sprinting back into the woods to seek a tresayne bush. There, right under the oak. He grabbed three leaves, and stuffed them into his mouth, chewing as he dashed into the waning sun. By the time he reached Camryn again the leaves had become a nice green bitter slush. He spat it into his right palm.

"This will help," he said, slapping the healing paste onto the bi-colored breast. Camryn snorted again and looked at him with those green-dark eyes.

"We'd better get a leg up," murmured Tymmons. He led Camryn again, wondering what Auntie and Uncle would have to say when he showed up with Camryn and only a handful of food.

Someone was coming. He saw a figure heading up over a gentle rise, walking alongside the woods, just as they were. It moved slowly, as if somehow fading along with the sunlight. Then it sat on a rock, head bowed.

It did not take them very long to pull near, and as they did so the figure looked up, and Tymmons saw that it was an old old woman, yet with the (still) dark hair, gray eyes, and white skin that proclaimed her to be of the Old Ones.

Tymmons quickened his pace. Maybe it would be better not to speak to this stranger. But she spoke to them, in a voice that was yet low and steady and not cracked by age.

“Ranthan,” she said, as if saying the strange word to herself. “Ah. How came he here?”

Tymmons stood, fidgeting, but Camryn at his shoulder grunted softly, flickering his ears, not shying away.

The Old One rose and approached Camryn, laying her bony hands on his head alongside the curling horn.

“Ranthan, you are a long way from home, are you not? You remind me of many things.”

Ranthan, thought Tymmons. Camryn’s kind?

The beast stood quiet under the stroking hands, until the old woman swayed, and would have fallen, had Tymmons not caught her and set her upon the rock again. He wondered—ghost or witch or merely tired traveler—and saw how thin she was, and thought of the wild food in his basket.

Wordless, he scooped it up and laid it in her lap. And, so she would not think him patronizing, he then asked her, “You said, ‘Ranthan,’ as if you had seen one of these beasts before. Tell me more, if you know more to tell.”

She went slowly to work on the berries. “Yes, I have seen beasts such as this before. They come from a land far from here. As perhaps I have. But—” She stopped, looked at him curiously, put her hands out to touch his brow as she had Camryn.

“You,” she murmured. “You have a power. A talent.” Tymmons felt himself grow sleepy; instead of struggling to

break free of the old woman, he thought of how pleasant a nap would be (heard Auntie's familiar litany: Sleepyhead!), of how surprisingly warm the air felt for so late in the day. And was not the grass so very nice and soft? As soft as the old woman's voice as she whispered to him: "Sometimes, the answers are there just for the listening."

He was riding Camryn then, his hair flowing with their speed over hill and dale. A tree rose to greet them, shouting, and Gunnora appeared on the crest of the wind, fruits spilling to the ground in her wake.

When Tymmons awoke, the old woman was gone, and the basket empty. Camryn stood over him in the dark, protective, warm, whuffling softly.

Sleepyhead! he chided himself, and hastened back home, bracing against the inevitable scolding.

"Tymmons, Tymmons. And what do you suppose we'll feed this monstrosity?" Auntie Roop shook her head, then lifted the empty basket.

He looked at his toes and drew a circle on the floor with them. Uncle Vannit had said nothing yet, and that he did not like. If asked about the Old One, he thought, no choice but the truth. But no need to volunteer information just yet. Besides, was she real or had he only dreamed her?

Then Uncle said, "Mushroom crumbs. How did they get in the basket?" and of course, he had to tell them. Uncle and Aunt listened, and then Uncle said he would see the wise woman and return to speak with them all.

When he had gone, Tymmons slipped out into the moonlight, drawing his thin shirt closer about him. He passed the naked kitchen garden and dead wheat field and looked into the sheep's pasture. He saw there the outline of Camryn, drained of color by the moon, and before he could call out, the beast came to him at a gallop, clipped fluff tail catching a stray bit of the night's light.

Camryn's breath and body warmed him, and he thought with fleeting guilt of the grass Camryn must eat which the

sheep also needed. But he knew that, he knew all of that. He slipped his arms around the powerful neck, and before he realized it, they were up, and away, and this time it was not a dream.

A cloud passed over the face of the moon, and it seemed to Tymmons that the cloud took Gunnora's shape.

Gunnora! Did she look down upon the barren fields and think of the people, her children, who were going to starve this winter?

Ranathan. The old woman had called his beast—for it was beyond doubt his now—Ranathan. A strange beast from a strange land, which touching, riding, seemed to waken equally strange things within him.

Thoughts. They streamed into his head and out again, like the wind streaming past his face under the moon. The cloud that had seemed to be in the shape of Gunnora had thinned, passed the moon, was gone.

Power? Talent? What had the old woman said?

He raised his face from Camryn's neck and saw that the beast had galloped him back home again.

How long had he been away? Uncle would be there by now. Angry again. One of those days where he could do nothing right, it seemed.

But he was not yet returned. And now Auntie Roop was gone too. Tymmons slipped back outside, and took care of Camryn, rubbing him down, giving him some of the water that remained in the near-side trough, standing close while the beast drank, wondering, wondering.

When Camryn was done and had trotted off to join the sheep (every living thing, thought Tymmons, needed company), the boy returned within, and went off to his pallet to fall into a rare, dreamless sleep, he who dreamed even with open eyes.

"What you are saying then," whispered the boy, "is that Gunnora wants Camryn to die."

The wise woman said nothing.

I won't believe it, he thought. Not Gunnora. They must be wrong, all of them. They are wrong. I shall prove them wrong.

"Sometimes," the wise woman began, "we must accept things that seem unpleasant. For the greater good."

Tymmons listened to her and pretended, nodding, allowing himself to look sober, sage beyond his years. In his mind's pasture Camryn frisked free and happy.

So. They had been at conference all the night. Selkurr the wise woman and Auntie and Uncle and some of the others. The Old One had been a bad omen, the beast itself a bad omen, that strange beast that none had ever seen before. The failed crops. Of course. Of course.

Needed: One sacrifice.

It was not that they hated him. It was not that they were cruel people. He knew that, as well as he knew the children and elders would need food the coming winter. He knew it all, and still . . .

He looked up, from the faces of his aunt and uncle to the wise woman, saying nothing to them, only nodding, and slowly rose to leave the room.

He went straight to the sheep-pasture, calling silently on Camryn, and again mounted and again rode, but slowly this time.

He remembered the old ram, the day before, the gleaming knife, the blood which would be saved for a pudding. (But some held back to sprinkle on the ground, for an offering). He leaned forward, touching Camryn's bloodred horn.

And turned Camryn, to head away from home, to go deep into the forest.

They walked carefully down a well-worn path, which during the daylight hours would receive some dappled sun, and so which grew the widest assortment of green things. A

rabbit scampered across their way just ahead, and unlike a horse, Camryn did not shy at the sudden movement.

Running away was wrong. That he knew. But he could *not* submit Camryn to the knife.

He stretched, listening to the insect songs and bird songs. If you cared to listen deeper you could, he thought, also hear the plant songs.

Gunnora—was she not the goddess of good, of growing things, of women, children? Tymmons shivered, knowing too that she had another part to her nature. Was not Gunnora also death?

He was not at all surprised to see the Old One coming up the path.

“Talented one,” she said to him, as they drew near.

Was she calling him a witch? This could not be possible. Was it not only women who had the great power?

Yet he did not run from her, this nameless lost stranger.

She laid hands on Camryn again, as she had when first they met. Camryn lowered his tufted head and green-dark eyes to her. Camryn did not fear her. How could she be a bad omen? But had they not also said that Camryn himself was such an omen?

Then she let go Camryn’s head and moved her hands to touch his own.

What is a dream? he thought. What is a dream, anyway? Is this a dream?

Gunnora riding the clouds over the moon. The bare black fields. The growing green forest and the green in Camryn’s eyes.

When Tymmons came again to his senses he was lying in the path, Camryn standing over him, half in shadow, half warm, half cold.

He sat up slowly and looked at the woods around him. Looked at Camryn. Looked again. And looked within.

How he had known of the blue sentinel that led him to the berries and of the healing tresayne and how a tree

wanted to be known and cared for. How he had always known.

What the crops were saying. What they needed.

Resolved, he mounted Camryn, and they galloped off toward home.

He tugged at Uncle Vannit's sleeve. "But do you not see? There is no need—"

Uncle Vannit pushed him back, away from Camryn. "Stand clear, boy, you need not watch this." The knife flashed bright at Uncle's belt.

They were pushing Camryn, docile intelligent green-eyed Camryn, into the pen where before the ram had been slain. They were going to close the gate and get inside and—

"No!" He vaulted the red roan back and clapped his heels to Camryn's sides. In a flash they galloped clear.

People protested, coming after, but he knew they could not catch him. He wheeled away some distance, then stood his ground, calling out to them.

"What must I do to convince?" Poised, poised for flight. "You do not need to spill his blood. I know the cause. I have seen it, heard it from the ground and the plants themselves. It is from the leavings of the strangers—earlier. That is what caused the crops to fail. There was that in their leavings which acted to poison the earth. It can be set right." He paused, looking down, then continued. "I listened. Camryn and the Old One—she was not evil—helped me to listen. As I have always done. Remember?" He looked at Uncle Vannit, pleading. "Remember?"

"Oh, so? Then let Gunnora herself—"

"Wait!" He galloped farther off, eyes closed. Please, give them some sign! Is this not your way? Is this not your will, that all things should be brought back into proper balance?

The Ranthan. Green-dark eyes. Touched the neck, saw the grandfather of all trees, saw the seeds not yet formed,

the fruit full ripe, Gunnora guardian of them all.

"Look to the clouds!" The cry went up.

Then, forming out of the low clouds it seemed, Gunnora herself.

The hum of their wonderment rose, then hushed.

"So." The goddess's voice floated to them like ripe wheat waving. They waited, respectful children all, Uncle lowering the knife.

"So. Waste is wrong. And how sad to waste such a natural gift as Tymmons can bring to bear."

As swiftly as she had come, so was the goddess gone, leaving them staring.

Tymmons closed his eyes, and started to breathe again.

He felt hands on him, hands on Camryn, leading them both back. He heard Uncle Vannit.

"What now?" said his uncle. "What now?" His uncle's hands were gentle on him, on Camryn. Auntie Roop stood close by, and her hand came out to touch the crimson curving horn.

What now indeed? Tymmons drew in another deep breath, looked around at the faces, the fields.

Much to be done. Now to call upon himself, to listen to what the life of the plants had to tell him. The earth to be cleansed with healing herbs, the planting of late-growing crops that would yet rise, riding, riding forth, before the hand of winter fell.

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Afterword

After I'd been invited to write a story for Tales of the Witch World, I got a very clear picture that I couldn't shake. It was

a strong image like a painting: a Ranthan far from home, stuck in the bushes—and some danger lurking nearby.

So I decided to follow the Ranthan around for a while. "Green in High Hallack" is what happened to him.

—KIEL STUART

