

LEGACY FROM SORN FEN

By Andre Norton

By the western wall of Klavenport on the Sea of Autumn Mists — but you do not want a bard's beginning to my tale, Goodmen? Well enough, I have no speak-harp to twang at all the proper times. And this is not altogether a tale for lords-in-their-halls. Though the beginning did lie in Klavenport right enough.

It began with one Higbold. It was after the Invaders' War and those were times when small men, if they had their wits sharpened, could rise in the world — swiftly, if fortune favored them. Which is a bard's way of saying they knew when to use the knife point, when to swear falsely, when to put hands on what was not rightfully theirs.

Higbold had his rats running to his whistle, and then his hounds to his horn. Finally no one spoke (save behind a shielding hand, glancing now and then over his shoulder) about his beginnings. He settled in the Gate Keep of Klavenport, took command there, married a wife who was hall-born (there were such to be given to landless and shieldless men then, their kin so harried by war, or dead in it, that they wait gladly to any one who offered a roof over their heads, meat in the dish, and mead in the cup before them). Higbold's lady was no more nor less than her sisters in following expediency.

Save that from the harsh days before her marriage she held memories. Perhaps it was those which made her face down Higbold himself in offering charity to those begging from door to door.

Among those came Caleb. He lacked an eye and walked with a lurch which nigh spilled him sprawling every time he took a full stride. What age he was no one could say; cruel mauling puts years on a man.

It might have been that the Lady Isbel knew him from the old days, but if so neither spoke of that. He became one of the household, working mainly in the small walled garden. They say that he was one with the power of growing things, that herbs stood straight and sweet-smelling for him, flowers bloomed richly under his tending.

Higbold had nothing to interest him in the garden. Save that now and then he met someone there where they could stand well in the open, walls too often having ears. For Higbold's ambition did not end in the keepership of the Klavenport Gate. Ah, no, such a man's ambition never ceases to grow. But you can gain only so much by showing a doubled fist, or a bared sword. After a certain point you must accomplish your means

more subtly, by influencing men's minds, not the enslavement of their bodies. Higbold studied well.

What was said and done in the garden one night in early midsummer was never known. But Higbold had a witness he did not learn about until too late. Only servants gossip as always about their masters, and there is a rumor that Caleb went to the Lady Isbel to talk privately. Then he took his small bundle of worldly goods and went forth, not only from the gate keep, but out of Klavenport as well, heading west on the highway.

Near the port there had been repairing, rebuilding, and the marks of the Invaders' War had faded from the land. But Caleb did not keep long to the highway. He was a prudent man, and knew that roads made for swift travel can lead hunters on a man's tracks.

Cross-country was hard, doubly so for his twisted body. He came to the fringes of the Fen of Sorn. Ah, I see you shake your heads and draw faces at that! Rightly do you so, Goodmen, rightly. We all know that there are parts of High Hallack which belong to the Old Ones, where men with sense in their thick skulls do not walk.

But it was there Caleb found that others had been before him. They were herdsman who had been driving the wild hill cattle (those which ranged free during the war) to market. Something had frightened the beasts and sent them running. Now the herders, half-mad with the thought of losing all reward of their hard labor, tracked them into the fen.

However, in so doing, they came upon something else. No, I shall not try to describe what they started out of its lair. You all know that there are secrets upon secrets in places like the fen. Enough to say that this had the appearance of a woman, enough to incite the lust of the drovers who had been kept long from the lifting of any skirt. Having cornered the creature, they were having their sport.

Caleb had not left Klavenport unarmed. In spite of his twisted body he was an expert with crossbow. Now he again proved his skill. Twice he fired and men howled like beasts — or worse than beasts seeing what they had been doing — beasts do not so use their females.

Caleb shouted as if he were leading a group of men-at-arms. The herders floundered away. Then he went down to what they had left broken behind them.

No man knows what happened thereafter, for Caleb spoke of it to no one. But in time he went on alone, though his face was white and his work-hardened hands shook.

He did not venture into the fen, but traveled, almost as one with a set purpose, along its edge. Two nights did he camp so. What he did and with whom he spoke, why those

came — who can tell? But on the morning of the third day he turned his back on Sorn Fen and started toward the highway.

It was odd but as he walked his lurching skip-step was not so evident, as if, with every stride he took, his twisted body seemed straighter. By the night of the fourth day he walked near as well as any man who was tired and footsore might. It was then that he came to the burned-out shell of the Inn of the Forks.

Once that had been a prosperous house. Much silver had spun across its tables into the hands of the keeper and his family. It was built at a spot where two roads, one angling north, one south, met, to continue thereon into Klavenport. But the day of its glory passed before the Battle of Falcon Cut. For five winter seasons or more its charred timbers had been a dismal monument to the ravages of war, offering no cheer for the traveler.

Now Caleb stood looking at its sad state and —

Believe this or not as you will, Goodmen. But suddenly here was no burned-out ruin. Rather stood an inn. Caleb, showing no surprise, crossed the road to enter. Enter it as master, for as such he was hailed by those about their business within its courtyard.

Now there were more travelers up and down the western roads, for this was the season of trade with Klavenport. So it was not long before the tale of the restored inn reached the city. There were those unable to believe such a report, who rode out, curious, to prove it true.

They found it much as the earlier inn had been. Though those who had known it before the war claimed there were certain differences. However, when they were challenged to name these, they were vague. But all united in the information that Caleb was host there and that he had changed with the coming of prosperity, for prosperous he certainly now was.

Higbold heard those reports. He did not frown, but he rubbed his forefinger back and forth under his thick lower lip. Which was a habit of his when he thought deeply, considering this point and that. Then he summoned to him a flaunty, saucy piece in skirts. She had long thrown herself in his direction whenever she could. It was common knowledge that, while Higbold had indeed bedded his lady in the early days of their marriage, to make sure that none could break the tie binding them, he was no longer to be found in her chamber, taking his pleasures elsewhere. Though as yet with none under his own roof.

Now he spoke privately with Elfra, and set in her hands a slip of parchment. Then openly he berated her loudly, had her bustled roughly, thrown into the street without

so much as a cloak about her shoulders. She wept and wailed, and took off along the western road.

In time she reached the Inn at the Forks. Her journey had not been an easy one so she crept into the courtyard as much a beggar in looks as any of the stinking, shuffling crowd who hung around a merchant's door in the city. Save that when she spoke to Caleb she gave him a bit of parchment with on it a message which might have been writ in my lady's hand. Caleb welcomed her and at length he made her waiting maid in the tap room. She did briskly well, such employment suiting her nature.

The days passed. Time slid from summer into autumn. At length the Ice Dragon sent his frost breath over the land. It was then that Elfra stole away with a merchant bound for Klavenport. Caleb, hearing of her going, shrugged and said that if she thought so to better her life the choice was hers.

But Elfra stayed with the merchant only long enough to reach the gate. From there she went directly to Higbold's own chamber. At first, as he listened, there was that in his face which was not good to see. But she did not take warning, sure that he looked so only because her tale was so wild. To prove the truth of her words she held her hand over the table.

About her thumb (so large it was that she could not wear it elsewhere on her woman's hand) was a ring of green stone curiously patterned with faint red lines as if veined with blood. Holding it directly in Higbold's sight, Elfra made a wish.

Below on the table there appeared a necklace of gems, such a necklace as might well be the ransom for a whole city in the days of the war. Higbold sucked in his breath, his face gone blank, his eyes half hooded by their lids.

Then his hand shot out and imprisoned her wrist in a grim grip and he had off that ring. She looked into his face and began to whimper, learning too late that she was only a tool, and one which had served its purpose now, and having served its purpose —

She was gone!

But Higbold cupped the ring between his palms and smiled evilly.

Shortly thereafter at the Inn flames burst out. No man could fight their fierce heat as they ate away what the magic of the Old Ones had brought into being. Once more Caleb stood in the cold owning nothing. Nothing, that is, except his iron will.

He wasted no time in regrets, nor in bewailing that lack of caution which had lost him his treasure. Rather he turned and began to stride along the road. When he came to a

certain place he cut away from the path of men. Though snow blew about him, and a knife-edged wind cut like a lash at his back, he headed for the fen.

Again time passed. No one rebuilt, by magic or otherwise, the Inn. But with Higbold things happened. Those who had once been firm against him became his supporters, or else suffered various kinds of chastening misfortune. His lady kept to her chamber. It was rumored that she ailed and perhaps would not live out the year.

There had never been a king of High Hallack, for the great lords held themselves all equal, one to another. None would have given support to a fellow to set him over the rest. But Higbold was not of their company, and so it might be a matter of either unite against him, or acknowledge his rulership. Still those men expected to be foremost in opposition to his rise seemed oddly hesitant to take any step to prevent it.

In the meantime there were rumors concerning a man who lived on the fringe of Sorn Fen and who was a tamer of beasts, even a seller of them. A merchant, enterprising and on the search for something unique, was enough intrigued by such tales to make a detour. He came into Klavenport from that side venture with three strange animals.

They were small, yet they had the look of the fierce snow cats of the high range. Only these were obviously tame, so tame that they quickly enchanted the merchants' wives and the ladies of the city into wanting them for pets. Twice the merchant returned to the fen fringe and bought more of the cats — well pleased each time with his bargain.

Then he needed an export permit and had to go to Higbold. So he came to the Keep bringing a "sweetener" for dealing after the custom — that being one of the cats. Higbold was not one with a liking for animals. His horses were tools to be used, and no hound ever lay in his hall or chamber. But he had the cat carried on to his lady's bower. Perhaps he thought that he would not have to consider her for long and this gift might give some coating of pretense.

Shortly after, he began to dream. Now there was certainly enough in his past to provide ill dreams for not one man but a troop. However, it was not of the past that he dreamed, but rather of the present, and perhaps a dark future. For in each of these dreams (and they were real enough to bring him starting up in bed calling for candles as he woke out of them), he had lost the ring Elfra had brought him — the ring now the core of all his schemes.

He had worn it secretly on a cord around his neck under his clothing. However, all his dreams were of it slipping from that security. So now when he slept he grasped it within his hand.

Then one morning he awoke to find it gone. Fear rode him hard until he found it among the covers on his bed. At last his night terrors drove him to putting it under his tongue as he slept. His tempers were such that those in close contact with him went in fear of their lives.

At last came the night when he dreamed again and this time the dream seemed very real. Something crouched first at the foot of his bed, and then it began a slow, slinking advance, stalking up the length of it. He could not move, but had to lie sweating, awaiting its coming.

Suddenly he roused out of that nightmare, sneezing. The ring lay where he had coughed it forth. By it crouched the strange cat, its eyes glowing so that he would swear it was no cat, but something else, more intelligent and malignant, which had poured its being into the cat's small body. It watched him with cold measurement and he was frozen, unable to put forth his hand to the ring. Then, calmly, it took up that circlet of green and red in its mouth, leaped from the bed and was gone.

Higbold cried out and grabbed. But the creature was already at the door of the chamber, streaking through as the guard came in answer to his lord's call. Higbold thrust the man aside as he raced to follow.

"The cat!" His shouts alarmed the whole keep. "Where is the cat?"

But it was the hour before daybreak when men were asleep. Those aroused by his shouting blinked and were amazed for a moment or two.

Higbold well knew that there were a hundred, no, a thousand places within that pile where such a small animal might hide, or drop to eternal loss that which it carried. That thought created frenzy in his brain, so that at first he was like one mad, racing to and fro, shouting to watch, to catch the cat.

Then came a messenger from the gate saying that the cat had been seen to leap the wall and run from the Keep, and the city, out into the country. Deep in him Higbold knew a growing cold which was like the chill of death, since it heralded the end of all his plans. For if the Keep provided such a wealth of hiding places, then what of the countryside?

He returned, stricken silent now with the fullness of his loss, to his chamber. There he battered his bare fists against the stone of the wall, until the pain of his self-bruising broke through the torment in his mind and he could think clearly again.

Animals could be hunted. He had hounds in his kennels, though he had never wasted time in the forms of the chase in which the high-born delighted. He would hunt that cat as no beast in High Hallack had ever been hunted before. Having come to his senses, he

gave orders in a tone of voice that made those about him flinch and look sidewise, keeping as distant as they dared.

In the hour before dawn the hunt was up, though it was a small party riding out of the Keep. Higbold had ordered with him only the master of hounds with a brace of the best trail keepers, and his squire.

The trail was so fresh and clear the hounds ran eagerly. But they did not pad along the highway, taking at once to open ground. This speedily grew more difficult for the riders, until the dogs far outstripped the men. Only their belling voices, raised now and then, told those laboring after that they still held the track. Higbold now had his fear under tight control, he did not push his horse, but there was a tenseness in the lines of his body which suggested that, if he could have grown wings, he would have soared ahead in an instant.

Wilder and rougher grew the country. The laboring squire's horse was lamed and had to drop behind. Higbold did not even spare him a glance. The sun was up and ahead was that smooth green of the fen country. In Higbold that frozen cold was nigh his heart. If the fleeing cat took into that there would be no following.

When they reached the outer fringe of that dire land the trail turned at an angle and ran along the edge, as if the creature had willfully decided not to trust to the promised safety beyond.

At length they came upon a small hut, built of the very material of this forsaken land, boulders and stones set together for its walls, a thatch of rough branches for roof. As they approached the hounds were suddenly thrown back as if they had run into an invisible wall. They yapped and leaped, and were again hurled to earth, their clamor wild.

Their master dismounted from his blowing horse and ran forward. Then he, too, met resistance. He stumbled and almost fell, putting out his hands and running them from right to left. He might have been stroking some surface.

Higbold came out of the saddle and strode forward.

"What is it?" For the first time in hours he spoke, his words grating on the ear.

"There — there is a wall, Lord — " quavered the master, and he shrank back from both the place and Higbold.

Higbold continued to tramp on. He passed the master and the slavering, whining hounds. The man, the dogs, were mad. There was no wall, there was only the hut and what he sought in it.

He set hand on the warped surface of the door and slammed it open with the full force of his frustration.

Before him was a rough table, a stool. On the stool sat Caleb. On the table top crouched the cat, purring under the measured stroking of the man's gentle hand. By the animal lay the ring.

Higbold strove to put out his hand, to snatch up that treasure. From the moment he sighted it, that had his full attention. The animal, the man, meant nothing to him. But now Caleb's other hand dropped loosely over the circlet Higbold was powerless to move.

"Higbold," Caleb addressed him directly, using no polite forms or title, "you are an evil man, but one of power — too much power. In the past year you have used that-very cleverly. A crown is nigh within your grasp — is that not so?"

Soft and smooth he spoke as one entirely without fear. He had no weapon, only lounged at his ease. Higbold's hatred now outweighed his fear, so that he wanted nothing so much as to smash the other's face into crimson ruin. Yet he could not stir so much as a finger.

"You have, I think," Caleb continued, "greatly enjoyed your possession of this." He raised his hand a little to show the ring.

"Mine — 1" Higbold's throat hurt as he shaped that thick word.

"No." Caleb shook his head, still gently, as one might to a child who demanded what was not and never could be his. "I shall tell you a tale, Higbold. This ring was a gift, freely given to me. I was able to ease somewhat the dying of one who was not of our kind, but had been death-dealt by those like you in spirit. Had she not been taken unawares she would have had her defenses, defenses such as you now taste. But she was tricked, and then used with such cruelty as would shame any one daring to call himself one of us. Because I tried to aid, though there was little I could do, I was left this token — and my keeping it was confirmed by her people. It can only be used for a limited time, however. I intended to use it for good. That is a thought to make you smile, isn't it, Higbold?"

"Then you used your lady's name to beg of me aid for one I thought badly treated. So, in my blindness, I brought about my own betrayal. I am a simple man, but there are things even the simple can do. To have Higbold for High King over this land — that is wrong — beyond one's own wishes or fears.

"So I spoke again to those of the fen, and with their aid I set a trap — to bring you hither. And you came, easily enough. Now." He lifted his hand and let the ring be. It

seemed there was a glow about it and again Higbold's eyes were drawn to it and he saw nothing else. Out of sight, beyond the gleaming green and red of the ring, a voice spoke.

"Take up the ring you wish so much, Higbold. Set it on your finger once again. Then go and claim your kingdom!"

Higbold found that now he could stretch forth his hand. His fingers closed about the ring. Hurriedly, lest it be rift from him once more, he pushed it on his finger.

He did not look again at Caleb, instead he turned and went out of the hut, as if the other man had ceased to exist. The hounds lay on their muddied bellies, whimpering a little as they licked at paws sore from their long run. Their master squatted on his heels watching for his lord's return. Their two horses stood with drooping heads, foam roping their bits.

Higbold did not move toward his mount, nor did he speak to the waiting hound master. Instead he faced west and south a little. As one who marches toward a visible and long desired goal, paying no heed to that about him, he strode toward the fen. His hound master did not move to stop him. Staring drop-jawed, he watched him go, until he was swallowed up in the mists.

Caleb came forth from the hut, the cat riding on his shoulder, and stood at ease. It was he who broke silence first

"Return to your lady, my friend, and say to her that Higbold has gone to seek his kingdom. He shall not return."

Then he, also, went to where the mists of the fen wreathed him around and he could no longer be seen.

When the master came again to Klavenport he told the Lady Isbel what he had seen and heard. Thereafter, she seemed to gather strength (as if some poison drained or shadow lifted from her) and came forth from her chamber. She set about making arrangements to give gifts from the wealth of Higbold.

When summer reached its height she rode forth before dawn, taking only one waiting maid (one who had come with her from her father's house and was tied with long bonds of loyalty). They were seen to follow the highway for a space as the guards watched. Thereafter no man marked where they went, and they were not seen again.

Whether she went to seek her lord, or another, who knows? For the Fen of Sorn renders not to our blood its many secrets.