



Portrait of a young woman
1880

THE LAST CELT

A review of the book compiled by Glenn Lord, published By Donald Grant, 1976, \$20.00

Glenn Lord and Donald Grant have collaborated on a handsome, stately book which is an enduring tribute to Robert E. Howard. It takes its place at once beside its fellow-Grant-published bibliography, the Heins "Golden Anniversary Bibliography of Edgar Rice Burroughs", to which, aside from its jacket being in color, whereas the Heins was in b/w, it is a matching volume. However, it is more akin, in style, to William F. Nolan's "The Ray Bradbury Companion" (Gale Research Co., 1975). Heins is nearly all bibliography plus artwork, whereas both Lord and Nolan present essays, memoirs and biography. Nevertheless, Heins had such a wealth of material, in hardcovers, softcovers and magazines to catalog, in innumerable editions, that it served to fill the large volume; one hopes the recently sparsely active Ray Bradbury will (in addition to a volume scheduled for this Fall) return to writing, and that new editions of Howard will continue to appear as well, so that new editions will ultimately be required.

Perhaps the only fault to be found with "The Last Celt" is that, in spite of a 1976 copyright, the book is already regrettably well behind the times. The de luxe Grant reprints do not appear, nor does the Kirk-illustrated reprint of "A Gent From Bear Creek", nor de Camp's "The Miscast Barbarian", the first sizeable biography of Howard. Even the generous inclusion of the first half dozen Rehupa mailings is far behind, particularly since, alas, I did not get in until about the ninth mailing and thereby missed inclusion in "The Last Celt"! Naturally, The Hyperborean League is far too recent for mention, which is especially regrettable inasmuch as it has already far outdistanced the amiable kaffee klatsch which, at least when I was a member, characterized the older Howardian apa.

The art section is a delight; would that space to reprint some of the interior illustrations as well were available (Heins did reprint some of the interiors for Burroughs.) And, sigh, if only a few of those preposterous but nostalgically delightful Brundage covers could have appeared in their original color....

Nevertheless, it is a splendid book. The loving memoirs, by Price, HPL and others, some new, some old; the calmly dispassionate biography by Glenn Lord; and his detailed bibliographies of magazine-originated material under a plethora of authorial names; all these contribute to the value of the book. Had I known the facts in the biography before I wrote my play for REH: LONE STAR FICTIONEER 4 I might have had a less dramatic site for Howard's suicide, but a more correct one. We may all be grateful to Glenn Lord for a book of inestimable and lasting value and use, and to Donald Grant for a format worthy of it.

THE SORCERER DESPAIRS

Michael Fantina

Alone the sorcerer despairs;
His night-dark sorcery ensnares
His tortured soul implacable.

There are no spells within the vast,
To call dead love from out the past,
To right once more the damnable.

Once with tenderest love he kissed
Her unadorned and pulsing wrist,
And gave her rings of gold and jade.

He was a man to evil bound--
Her love had sown an arid ground--
And so it was his love did fade.

He thought not of her loving care;
He grew to hate her eyes and hair,
And wearied of her loveliness.

To sate his tenebrous ennui,
He tortured her with sorcery
And triumphed in his callousness.

Wuth all the guile of his dark brain
He racked her with unceasing pain,
Until her soul fled anguishing.

But then it was this black ennui,
Turned poetical irony--
His spirit now was languishing!

The thought of what he'd done had rent
His soul in twain with black lament--
His black arts now a mockery.

(Cont.)

(Fantina: Cont.)

He caused her corpse to move and walk;
Cajoled it to a loving talk
Through necromantic wizardry.

But such a thing brought only grief,
Like some demoniacal thief
It robbed him of all peacefulness.

Sweet wines to him were like to dust,
And each new love an empty lust--
His days a boundless weariness.

At length he laid her corpse to rest
While in his rent and yearning breast
Black grief had grown gigantic.

With trembling hands he quaffed the wine,
A poisoned cup--to him sublime--
Amon he died romantic.

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Michael Fantina has already achieved respect and reknown for his poetry in the Lovecraft tradition, and his sonnet cycle in the manner of "Fungi From Yuggoth" is indispensable to Lovecraftians. The booklet, entitled Night Terrors, may be obtained from the author, 32 Old Army Rd., Bernardsville, N.J. 07924, handsomely printed in stiff folders for only \$1.00. Of "The Sorcerer Despairs", written in the spirit of Clarke Ashton Smith and his spiritual mentor, Charles Baudelaire, Fantina writes: "I do enjoy 'hothouse decadence', at least in poetry. I sometimes dream I am a latterday Baudelaire.. (However) the rhyme scheme was 'inspired' by Oscar Wilde's THE HARLOTS HOUSE."

David C. Smith, who drew the cover specifically for this poem is a modern Renaissance man, skilled in art, fiction, poetry, and cinematography. An example of his fiction will appear in the new fiction magazine, CHAGALL, published by Byron Roark and Arnie Fenner, the miracle duo who were responsible for REH: LONE STAR FICTIONEER.

From "The Sword in the Stone" to "The Once and Future King"

It is perhaps stretching a point to describe the Arthurian legends as Sword and Sorcery, but, obviously, the elements are there, even if the spirit is different. Everyone knows of Excalibur, the legendary sword found by Arthur, King-to-be, embedded in a stone, just as we all know the name and dark reputation of that sorceress Morgan LeFay. And we have all read tearfully of the final battle in which Arthur fell. It is a chivalric romance primarily, closer to the world of Tolkien, who was no doubt influenced by it, than to that of Robert E. Howard, in whose world chivalry is not a notable element. Nevertheless, it is heroic romance, and a legitimate precursor to the more sanguinary breed which would follow.

This is all prelude to some discussion of my dear favorite, Terence Hanbury White's septet of books (really three novels plus a tetralogy) on the Arthur theme. I would hope that all devotees of fantasy have read T.H. White's "The Once and Future King"; possibly not everyone has read the three novels which preceded it, and the points of comparison are interesting, both in themselves and as a clue to the workings of a writer's mind. The titles and order of publication are:

The Sword in the Stone, 1938 (England) 1939 (New York)
The Witch in the Wood, 1940 (England) 1939 (New York)
The Ill-Made Knight, 1941 (London) 1940 (New York)
The Once and Future King, 1958, (London and New York)

The dates are, in a sense, misleading, for as early as 1941 White was readying the tetralogy plus a fifth book for publication. Disagreements with publishers long delayed the final publication.

His love of medievalism must have been White's initial impetus to rewrite Mallory in "The Sword in the Stone." He pours into it his wit, his knowledge and the fantasy which would be a part of much which he wrote. Part of its charm is his use of anachronism: characters who talk in a contemporary manner; Merlyn, who lives backwards in Time; Morgan LeFay who has been taken from the cover of a 1938 PHOTOPLAY MAGAZINE. The book is the story of Arthur's boyhood, when he is known simply as the Wart, until the time of his discovery of the Sword Excalibur and his accession to the throne. By the time White came to the second book, the situation in Europe politically had made a deep impress on him. War was a horror which must, he felt, be avoided. Inevitably, it affected the content of his book. In "The Witch in the Wood" he first states his theory, placing it into the ingenuous but hopeful Arthur's mouth; it will be behind his desire for the Round Table and the Knights. Arthur tells Merlyn:

"Might isn't Right. But there is an awful lot of Might in the world, and something has got to be done about it. It is as if people were half horrible and half nice...Why can't you manage to harness Might so that it works for Right? ... It sounds awful bosh, but ... you can't just say there isn't such a thing. The Might is there, in the bad half of people, and you can't neglect it. You can't cut it out but you might be able to divert it ... so that it was useful instead of bad ... I will institute a sort of order of chivalry...a great honor...fashionable and all that. Everybody must want to be in it. And then I shall make the oath of this order that Might is only to be used for Right...All my knights in my order will ride all over the world, still dressed in steel and whacking away with their swords -- that will give them an outlet for ^{the} wanting to

whack, you see -- but they will be bound to strike only on behalf of what is good...It will be using the Might instead of fighting against it..."

The theme would, however, be sublimated to the essential Mallory-Arthur legend in this and the following book, "The Ill-Made Knight." When White decided to add two more books, and, finally, to rewrite the first three, his changes were all made with his ultimate pacifistic aim. It is interesting to compare the books and see what happened. For the true lovers of "SWORD" there is, in a sense, a bonus, since he had new interludes in the new version; on the other hand, some of the lightness of the original is gone. Since it is really the most successful book, one must decide for oneself whether the changes in deference to a larger purview are worth it.

The change which has always remained with me most distinctly is that which Morgan LeFay undergoes. In the original, she is nothing less than a Hollywood film star. Her castle, which in both books is an obstacle to be overcome by the Wart and his companion, the nobly born Kay, represents gluttony. In the original, the boys come upon it in the forest, blazing with light, a typical 1930's Movie Palace, with neon lights and a marquee reading: THE QUEEN OF AIR AND DARKNESS: NOW SHOWING. Inside is an usher with epaulettes and gold braid, and plush red carpet. Moorish maidens, candies and foods abound, temptingly described, even negro minstrels rolling their eyes are on hand, singing mock spirituals behind an ice cream bar. And the great witch herself? She is the most Hollywoodian of all, wearing "beach pajamas and smoked glasses", lolling "full-length on a white leather sofa." The walls are filled with celebrity photographs signed personally to her: "Darling Margy from Oberon", "From Charlie to his Own Queenie" etc. And, she holds a long greenjade cigarette holder and a cigarette which she blows at the boys. She is somehow remote from them, but she is beautiful. It is a daring and a comic conceit, and it works in the context of a novel filled with fantasy.

In the rewritten version, the use of the castle and the witch as a symbol of gluttony is greatly heightened. The boys come upon the castle, a near-amorphous pile in the woods: "It smelt like a grocer's, a baker's, a dairy and a fishmonger's, rolled into one. It was horrible beyond belief." Gone is the marquee, the usher, the theatre, the minstrels; instead of traveling from one amusing and tempting floor of goodies to another, the boys come nearly at once to the witch. And she, far from the beautiful queen, is a "fat, dowdy, middle-aged woman with black hair and a slight moustache...stretched upon of her bed of glorious lard." It is quite a change indeed.

Merlyn teaches the Wart about Life by transforming him into various animals and exposing him to their lives and environments. Some are amusing, and exciting and some serve the author's later didactic purpose. White's love of falconry appears in near constant form in each book when the Wart becomes a peregrine falcon (White publishes a brilliant and poignant book about hawking, THE OSHAWK, in 1952.) On the other hand, after the Witch incident, there is an amusing and leisurely sequence in the earlier book wherein Wart experiences life as a Snake. In the revision, the scene is replaced by a visit to an Ant Kingdom which is an allegory on Communism and Fascism. Along the way, a delightfully wacky episode involving another witch, Madame Mim vanishes entirely from the later version. In examining the books, it is remarkable how White went over each line, each word even. Where in the first book he writes "The Wart slept well in the woodland" the revision reads "The boy slept well in the woodland." The replacement of "Wart", a fond pejorative, by the generic "boy" is a change of tone indeed.

Later, as a wild goose, the earlier version treats it in the manner of classical fantasy, wherein Wart meets the goddess Athene in a pantheistic scene; in a rather realistic scene in the revision, Wart discusses the tendency of men to indulge in war and killing, which the peaceful birds find abhorrent.

There are minor changes in the great climax scene, in which the Wart, trying to find a sword for his master and former comrade, Sir Kay, happens across the great sword embedded within a stone in a marketplace, only its hilt protruding. It is the most memorable scene in either version, and one of the great images in literature. Aided by his memories of experiences in Nature, Wart is able on a third try to remove the sword. Kay, recognizing it for what it is, the key to the throne of England, pretends he had removed the magical sword. Faced, however, by his father's innate love and trust, he confesses that the Wart, and not he, must be honored. The wrap-up chapter too is identical, in which Merlyn addresses the Wart for the very first time in either book by his proper name, with the title of nobility, King Arthur. There is really no improving on perfection.

"The Sword in the Stone" in either version possesses the grace and beauty of free fantasy. As I have said, it is a treat for us to be able to enjoy it in two forms, each the author's own work. For his second book, White resumes the story according to Mallory, after his own manner. To one reader's dismay, the title, "The Witch in the Wood" did not refer to Morgan LeFay, an old favorite. It is Morgause to whom White refers, and, in the revision, having dropped the reference to Morgan LeFay as "Queen of Air and Darkness" he simply hands it over to Morgause, daughter by rape to Uther Pendragon, and entitles that portion of the tetralogy with it. The original book is perhaps the least successful of the first three. The comedy, with several loveable, clumsy knights, is labored; Arthur must grow, and White sees him as a good-natured, trusting, somewhat ingenuous soul; he will gain measurably in dignity later, but these qualities remain. White excises nearly half the book for his revision, with no great loss. The fantasy vanishes, not to return except briefly and as a "miracle" at the climax of the third volume. Merlyn, old and dreaming now, is waiting for Nimue to ensorcle him into a tree, there to sleep until needed. The book's impact, altered in minor ways by the author is essentially identical in each version: Arthur's fate, as Aristotlean tragedy, is to father a child, albeit through her trickery, to Morgause, his half-sister, and the child, Mordred, will one day be his own murderer.

Launcelot joins Arthur in "The Ill-Made Knight", and White uses the book very much intact. It is a dark story of love and disillusion, as Launcelot and Arthur's bride, Guinever, fall in love. Arthur, loving both, can hurt neither, but matured by anguish and understanding, he perceives that his dream must die. In the final book, "The Candle In the Wind", facing failure at the end, Arthur recalls his childhood dreams, and finds wistful hope that one day Reason may prevail.

White had planned a fifth and vital book, and this must forever intrigue us: The Book of Merlyn. It would have cinched his argument, he felt, for "Morte D'Arthur's central theme being an antidote to war". Altercations with publishers delayed it continually. A set of proofs which White demanded, requiring them always, he felt, since "without (them) I can never properly pull a book together," was so late coming, that his biographer, Sylvia Townsend Warner, writes: "he had lost heart, and was probably out of conceit with the book no one had welcomed." She continues:

"Besides, he had missed the boat. He had written 'The Book of Merlyn' believing that it would influence the way people thought about war and induce them to make a new and more sensible kind of peace; but he had written it as the clinching last section of a very long work..."

In a letter to his closest friend, David Garnett (author of "Lady Into Fox") in 1941, White wrote:

"The last book, Number 5, is, I hope, the crown of the whole. ...The Round Table was an anti-Hitler . . .measure. It began by trying to control Might-as-Right in individuals...then in Book 4...it recognizes that Might-as-Right must be quashed altogether....Arthur invents 'Law' .. and is prepared to sacrifice both Lancelot and Guinever to the ideal...All his life he was trying to dam a flood which broke out in new places. This book brings him face to face with the final theme, and ends with him broken. Now we come to Book 5, a frightfully tricky bit of writing because it goes back to the animals of Book 1. The trouble is not to let it be puerile. I have resisted the temptation to turn him back into a boy by magic, but he has got to visit two more kinds of animals, Ants & Wild Geese...At the end, ... Arthur goes back to his battle and comes to his end. ...I insinuate he is back in the badger's sett, waiting to come out and help us with Merlin and all of them, if we ever let the time come."

Obviously, salvaged portions of the ill-fated Book 5 ended up in the rewritten SWORD. He continues to Garrett, about the second section:

"Well, you've got to help me about The Witch in the ^Wood. Morgause is the villain of the piece, (I may mention that she is my mother.) This is why I have had such awful difficulty with her."

In a later letter, having already cut much of the book and changed its tone, he has also ceased using Morgause in a humorous manner. He says:

"The Queen herself appears on three occasions, each time as a serious villain, not gayed. She appears (1) Boiling a black cat alive, (2) beating her children, (3) standing in the moonlight with a bit of a dead man's skin, which she intends to use as a love charm."

Every writer uses his own life and his feelings about others in his work. White was a man troubled by what he realized was his own homosexuality; he released his love only toward animals, his birds, his dog. He came more and more to drink too much. Eventually, some of his tensions due to financial worries were relieved by the Book-of-the-Month Club accepting his Lilliputian fantasy, "Mistress Masham's ^repose" (they had accepted "The Sword in the Stone" back in 1940.) To help, in 1959, Lerner and Loewe contracted to musicalize his Tetralogy as "Camelot" (it was later filmed as well,) and Walt Disney Studios exercised a 20-year option to animate SWORD. His final years, then, were somewhat more comfortable, and, after his fashion, less tense. If ever a compulsion to complete "The Book of Merlyn" existed, it was by now long since gone with other dreams.

The references referred to are: T.H. WHITE, by Sylvia Townsend Warner, Viking Press, 1967, and THE WHITE/GARNETT LETTERS, edited by David Garnett, Viking Press, 1968. THE SWORD AND THE STONE and THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING are readily available in paperback; regrettably, THE WITCH IN THE WOOD and THE ILL-MADE KNIGHT are long out of print.