

The Story Begins...

There was once an inn that sat peacefully on the bank of the Thames at Radcot, a day's walk from the source. There were a great many inns along the upper reaches of the Thames at the time of this story and you could get drunk in all of them, but beyond the usual ale and cider each one had some particular pleasure to offer. The Red Lion at Kelmescot was musical: bargemen played their fiddles in the evening and cheesemakers sang plaintively of lost love. Inglesham had the Green Dragon, a tobacco-scented haven of contemplation. If you were a gambling man, the Stag at Eaton Hastings was the place for you, and if you preferred brawling, there was nowhere better than the Plough just outside Buscot. The Swan at Radcot had its own specialty. It was where you went for storytelling.

The Swan was a very ancient inn, perhaps the most ancient of them all. It had been constructed in three parts: one was old, one was very old, and one was older still. These different elements had been harmonized by the thatch that roofed them, the lichen that grew on the old stones, and the ivy that scrambled up the walls. In summertime day-trippers came out from the towns on the new railway,

to hire a punt or a skiff at the Swan and spend an afternoon on the river with a bottle of ale and a picnic, but in winter the drinkers were all locals, and they congregated in the winter room. It was a plain room in the oldest part of the inn, with a single window pierced through the thick stone wall. In daylight this window showed you Radcot Bridge and the river flowing through its three serene arches. By night (and this story begins at night) the bridge was drowned black and it was only when your ears noticed the low and borderless sound of great quantities of moving water that you could make out the stretch of liquid blackness that flowed outside the window, shifting and undulating, darkly illuminated by some energy of its own making.

Nobody really knows how the tradition of storytelling started at the Swan, but it might have something to do with the Battle of Radcot Bridge. In 1387, five hundred years before the night this story began, two great armies met at Radcot Bridge. The who and the why of it are too long to tell, but the outcome was that three men died in battle, a knight, a varlet, and a boy, and eight hundred souls were lost, drowned in the marshes, attempting to flee. Yes, that's right. *Eight hundred souls*. That's a lot of story. Their bones lie under what are now watercress fields. Around Radcot they grow the watercress, harvest it, crate it up, and send it to the towns on barges, but they don't eat it. It's bitter, they complain, so bitter it bites you back, and besides, who wants to eat leaves nourished by ghosts? When a battle like that happens on your doorstep and the dead poison your drinking water, it's only natural that you would tell of it, over and over again. By force of repetition you would become adept at the telling. And then, when the crisis was over and you turned your attention to other things, what is more natural than that this newly acquired expertise would come to be applied to other tales? Five hundred years later they still tell the story of the Battle of Radcot Bridge, five or six times a year on special occasions.

The landlady of the Swan was Margot Ockwell. There had been Ockwells at the Swan for as long as anyone could remember, and quite likely for as long as the Swan had existed. In law her name was Margot Bliss, for she was married, but law was a thing for the towns and cities; here at the Swan she remained an Ockwell. Margot was a handsome woman in her late fifties. She could lift barrels without help and had legs so sturdy, she never felt the need to sit down. It was rumored she even slept on her feet, but she had given birth to thirteen children, so clearly she must have lain down sometimes. She was the daughter of the last landlady, and her grandmother and great-grandmother had run the inn before that, and nobody thought anything of it being women in charge at the Swan at Radcot. It was just the way it was.

Margot's husband was Joe Bliss. He had been born at Kemble, twenty-five miles upstream, a hop and a skip from where the Thames emerges from the earth in a trickle so fine that it is scarcely more than a patch of dampness in the soil. The Blisses were chesty types. They were born small and ailing and most of them were goners before they were grown. Bliss babies grew thinner and paler as they lengthened, until they expired completely, usually before they were ten and often before they were two. The survivors, including Joe, got to adulthood shorter and slighter than average. Their chests rattled in winter, their noses ran, their eyes watered. They were kind, with mild eyes and frequent playful smiles.

At eighteen, an orphan and unfit for physical labor, Joe had left Kemble to seek his fortune doing as he knew not what. From Kemble there are as many directions a man can go in as elsewhere in the world, but the river has its pull; you'd have to be mightily perverse not to follow it. He came to Radcot and, being thirsty, stopped for a drink. The frail-looking young man with flowing black hair that contrasted with his pallor, sat unnoticed, eking out his glass of ale, admiring the innkeeper's daughter, and listening to

a story or two. He found it captivating to be among people who spoke out loud the kind of tales that had been alive inside his head since boyhood. In a quiet interval he opened his mouth and *Once upon a time* . . . came out.

Joe Bliss discovered his destiny that day. The Thames had brought him to Radcot and at Radcot he stayed. With a bit of practice he found he could turn his tongue to any kind of tale, whether it be gossip, historic, traditional, folk, or fairy. His mobile face could convey surprise, trepidation, relief, doubt, and any other feeling as well as any actor. Then there were his eyebrows. Luxuriantly black, they told as much of the story as his words did. They drew together when something momentous was coming, twitched when a detail merited close attention, and arched when a character might not be what he seemed. Watching his eyebrows, paying attention to their complex dance, you noticed all sorts of things that might otherwise have passed you by. Within a few weeks of his starting to drink at the Swan, he knew how to hold the listeners spellbound. He held Margot spellbound too, and she him.

At the end of a month, Joe walked sixty miles to a place quite distant from the river, where he told a story in a competition. He won first prize, naturally, and spent the winnings on a ring. He came home grey with fatigue, collapsed into bed for a week, and, at the end of it, got to his knees and proposed marriage to Margot.

“I don’t know . . .” her mother said. “Can he work? Can he earn a living? How will he look after a family?”

“Look at the takings,” Margot pointed out. “See how much busier we are since Joe started telling his stories. Suppose I don’t marry him, Ma. He might go away from here. Then what?”

It was true. People came more often to the inn these days, and from further away, and they stayed longer to hear the stories Joe told. They all bought drinks. The Swan was thriving.

“But with all these strong, handsome young men that come in here and admire you so . . . wouldn’t one of those do better?”

“It is Joe that I want,” Margot said firmly. “I like the stories.”

She got her way.

Th was all nearly forty years before the events of this story, and in the meantime Margot and Joe had raised a large family. In twenty years they had produced twelve robust daughters. All had Margot’s thick brown hair and sturdy legs. Th y grew up to be buxom young women with blithe smiles and endless cheer. All were married now. One was a little fatter and one a little thinner, one a little taller and one a little shorter, one a little darker and one a little fairer, but in every other respect they were so like their mother that the drinkers could not tell them apart, and when they returned to help out at busy times, they were universally known as Little Margot. After bearing all these girls there had been a lull in the family life of Margot and Joe, and both of them thought her years of child-bearing were at an end, but then came the last pregnancy and Jonathan, their only son.

With his short neck and his moon face, his almond eyes with their exaggerated upward tilt, his dainty ears and nose, the tongue that seemed too big for his constantly smiling mouth, Jonathan did not look like other children. As he grew it became clear that he was different from them in other ways too. He was fifteen now, but where other boys of his age were looking forward impatiently to manhood, Jonathan was content to believe that he would live at the inn forever with his mother and father, and wished for nothing else.

Margot was still a strong and handsome woman, and Joe’s hair had whitened, though his eyebrows were as dark as ever. He was now sixty, which was ancient for a Bliss. People put his survival down to the endlessness of Margot’s care for him. Th last few years he was sometimes so weak that he lay in bed for two or three days at a time, eyes closed. He was not sleeping—no, it was a place beyond sleep that he visited in these periods. Margot took his sinking spells calmly. She kept the fi e in to dry the air, tilted cooled broth between his lips, brushed his hair, and smoothed his eyebrows.

Other people fretted to see him suspended so precariously between one liquid breath and the next, but Margot took it in her stride. “Don’t you worry, he’ll be all right,” she would tell you. And he was. He was a Bliss, that’s all. The river had seeped into him and made his lungs marshy.

It was solstice night, the longest night of the year. For weeks the days had been shrinking, first gradually, then precipitously, so that it was now dark by mid-afternoon. As is well-known, when the moon hours lengthen, human beings come adrift from the regularity of their mechanical clocks. They nod at noon, dream in waking hours, open their eyes wide to the pitch-black night. It is a time of magic. And as the borders between night and day stretch to their thinnest, so too do the borders between worlds. Dreams and stories merge with lived experience, the dead and the living brush against each other in their comings and goings, and the past and the present touch and overlap. Unexpected things can happen. Did the solstice have anything to do with the strange events at the Swan? You will have to judge for yourself.

Now you know everything you need to know, the story can begin.

The drinkers gathered in the Swan that night were the regulars. Gravel diggers, cressmen, and bargemen for the most part, but Beszant the boat mender was there too, and so was Owen Albright, who had followed the river to the sea half a century ago and returned two decades later a wealthy man. Albright was arthritic now, and only strong ale and storytelling could reduce the pain in his bones. They had been there since the light had drained out of the sky, emptying and refilling their glasses, tapping out their pipes and restuffing them with pungent tobacco and telling stories.

Albright was recounting the Battle of Radcot Bridge. After five hundred years any story is liable to get a bit stale, and the story-

tellers had found a way to enliven the telling of it. Certain parts of the tale were fixed by tradition—the armies, their meeting, the death of the knight and his varlet, the eight hundred drowned men—but the boy’s demise was not. Not a thing was known about him except that he was a boy, at Radcot Bridge, and he died there. Out of this void came invention. At each retelling the drinkers at the Swan raised the unknown boy from the dead in order to inflict upon him a new death. He had died countless times over the years, in ways ever more outlandish and entertaining. When a story is yours to tell, you are allowed to take liberties with it—though woe betide any visitor to the Swan who attempted the same thing. What the boy himself made of his regular resurrection is impossible to say, but the point is raising the dead was a not infrequent thing at the Swan, and that’s a detail worth remembering.

Tonight Owen Albright conjured him in the garb of a young entertainer, come to distract the troops while they awaited their orders. Juggling with knives, he slipped in the mud and the knives rained down around him, landing blade down in wet earth, all but the last one, which fell plumb into his eye and killed him instantly before the battle had even begun. The innovation elicited murmurs of appreciation, quickly dampened so the tale could continue, and from then on the tale ran pretty much as it always did.

Afterwards there was a pause. It wasn’t done to jump in too quickly with a new story before the last one was properly digested.

Jonathan had been listening closely.

“I wish I could tell a story,” he said.

He was smiling—Jonathan was a boy who was always smiling—but he sounded wistful. He was not stupid, but school had been baffling to him, the other children had laughed at his peculiar face and strange ways, and he had given it up after a few months. He had not mastered reading or writing. The winter regulars were used to the Ockwell lad, with all his oddness.

“Have a go,” Albright suggested. “Tell one now.”

Jonathan considered it. He opened his mouth and waited, agog, to hear what emerged from it. Nothing did. His face screwed tight with laughter and his shoulders squirmed in hilarity at himself.

“I can’t!” he exclaimed when he recovered himself. “I can’t do it!”

“Some other night, then. You have a bit of a practice and we’ll listen to you when you’re ready.”

“You tell a story, Dad,” Jonathan said. “Go on!”

It was Joe’s first night back in the winter room after one of his sinking spells. He was pale and had been silent all evening. Nobody expected a story from him in his frail state, but at the prompting of his son he smiled mildly and looked up to a high corner of the room where the ceiling was darkened from years of woodsmoke and tobacco. This was the place, Jonathan supposed, where his father’s stories came from. When Joe’s eyes returned to the room, he was ready and opened his mouth to speak.

“Once upon a—”

The door opened.

It was late for a newcomer. Whoever it was did not rush to come in. The cold draft set the candles flickering and carried the tang of the winter river into the smoky room. The drinkers looked up.

Every eye saw, yet for a long moment none reacted. They were trying to make sense of what they were seeing.

The man—if man it was—was tall and strong, but his head was monstrous and they boggled at the sight of it. Was it a monster from a folktale? Were they sleeping and this a nightmare? The nose was askew and flattened, and beneath it was a gaping hollow dark with blood. As sights went, it was horrifying enough, but in its arms the awful creature carried a large puppet, with waxen face and limbs and slickly painted hair.

What roused them to action was the man himself. He first roared, a great bellow as misshapen as the mouth it emerged from, then he staggered and swayed. A pair of farmhands jumped from their seats

just in time to grab him under the arms and arrest his fall so that he did not smash his head on the flagstones. At the same time Jonathan Ockwell leapt forward from the fireside, arms outstretched, and into them dropped the puppet with a solid weightiness that took his joints and muscles by surprise.

Returning to their senses, they hoisted the unconscious man onto a table. A second table was dragged so that the man's legs could be rested upon it. Then when he was laid down and straightened out, they all stood around and raised their candles and lamps over him. The man's eyes did not flicker.

"Is he dead?" Albright wondered.

There was a round of indistinct murmurs and much frowning.

"Slap his face," someone suggested. "See if that brings him round."

"A tot of liquor'll do it," another suggested.

Margot elbowed her way to the top of the table and studied the man. "Don't you go slapping him. Not with his face in that state. Nor pouring anything down his throat. Just you wait a minute."

Margot turned away to the seat by the hearth. On it was a cushion, and she picked it up and carried it back to the light. With the aid of the candles she spotted a pinprick of white on the cotton. Picking at it with her fingernail, she drew out a feather. The men's faces watched her, eyes wide with bewilderment.

"I don't think you'll wake a dead man by tickling him," said a gravel digger. "Nor a live one either, not in this state."

"I'm not going to tickle him," she replied.

Margot laid the feather on the man's lips. All peered. For a moment there was nothing, then the soft and plummy parts of the feather shivered.

"He breathes!"

The relief soon gave way to renewed perplexity.

"Who is it, though?" a bargeman asked. "Do anyone know him?"

There followed a few moments of general hubbub, during which

they considered the question. One reckoned he knew everybody on the river from Castle Eaton to Duxford, which was some ten miles, and he was sure he didn't know the fellow. Another had a sister in Lechlade and was certain he had never seen the man there. A third felt that he might have seen the man somewhere, but the longer he looked, the less willing he was to put money on it. A fourth wondered whether he was a river gypsy, for it was the time of year when their boats came down this stretch of the river, to be stared at with suspicion, and everybody made sure to lock their doors at night and bring inside anything that could be lifted. But with that good woolen jacket and his expensive leather boots—no. This was not a ragged gypsy man. A fifth stared and then, with triumph, remarked that the man was the very height and build of Liddiard from Whitey's Farm, and was his hair not the same color too? A sixth pointed out that Liddiard was here at the other end of the table, and when the fifth looked across, he could not deny it. At the end of these and further discussions, it was agreed by one, two, three, four, five, six, and all the others present that they didn't know him—at least they didn't think so—but, looking as he did, who could be certain?

Into the silence that followed this conclusion, a seventh man spoke. "Whatever has befallen him?"

The man's clothes were soaking wet, and the smell of the river, green and brown, was on him. Some accident on the water, that much was obvious. They talked of dangers on the river, of the water that played tricks on even the wisest of rivermen.

"Is there a boat? Shall I go and see if I can spy one?" Beszant the boat mender offered.

Margot was washing the blood from the man's face with firm and gentle motions. She winced as she revealed the great gash that split his upper lip and divided his skin into two flaps that gaped to show his broken teeth and bloodied gum.

"Leave the boat," she instructed. "It is the man that matters. There is more here than I can help with. Who will run for Rita?" She looked

round and spotted one of the farmhands who was too poor to drink much. “Neath, you are quick on your feet. Can you run along to Rush Cottage and fetch the nurse without stumbling? One accident is quite enough for one night.”

The young man left.

Jonathan meanwhile had kept apart from the others. The weight of the drenched puppet was cumbersome, so he sat down and arranged it on his lap. He thought of the papier-mâché dragon that the troupe of guisers had brought for a play last Christmastime. It was light and hard and had rapped with a light tat-tat-tat if you beat your fingernails against it. This puppet was not made of that. He thought of the dolls he had seen, stuffed with rice. They were weighty and soft. He had never seen one this size. He sniffed its head. There was no smell of rice—only the river. The hair was made of real hair, and he couldn’t work out how they had joined it to the head. The ear was so real, they might have molded it from a real one. He marveled at the perfect precision of the lashes. Putting his fingertip gently to the soft, damp, tickling ends of them caused the lid to move a little. He touched the lid with the gentlest of touches, and there was something behind. Slippery and globular, it was soft and firm at the same time.

Something darkly unfathomable gripped him. Behind the backs of his parents and the drinkers, he gave the figure a gentle shake. An arm slid and swung from the shoulder joint, in a way a puppet’s arm ought not to swing, and he felt a rising water level, powerful and rapid, inside him.

“It is a little girl.”

In all the discussion around the injured man, nobody heard.

Again, louder: “*It is a little girl!*”

They turned.

“She won’t wake up.” He held out the sodden little body so that they might see for themselves.

They turned. They moved to stand around Jonathan. A dozen pairs of stricken eyes rested on the little body.

Her skin shimmered like water. The folds of her cotton frock were plastered to the smooth lines of the limbs, and her head tilted on her neck at an angle no puppeteer could achieve. She was a little girl, and they had not seen it, not one of them, though it was obvious. What maker would go to such lengths, making a doll of such perfection only to dress it in the cotton smock any pauper's daughter might wear? Who would paint a face in that macabre and lifeless manner? What maker other than the good Lord had it in him to make the curve of that cheekbone, the planes of that shin, that delicate foot with five toes individually shaped and sized and detailed? Of course it was a little girl! How could they ever have thought otherwise?

In the room usually so thick with words, there was silence. The men who were fathers thought of their own children and resolved to show them nothing but love till the end of their days. Those who were old and had never known a child of their own suffered a great pang of absence, and those who were childless and still young were pierced with the longing to hold their own offspring in their arms.

At last the silence was broken.

"Good Lord!"

"Dead, poor mite."

"Drowned!"

"Put the feather on her lips, Ma!"

"Oh, Jonathan. It is too late for her."

"But it worked with the man!"

"No, son, he was breathing already. The feather only showed us the life that was still in him."

"It might still be in her!"

"It is plain she is gone, poor lass. She is not breathing, and besides, you have only to look at her color. Who will carry the poor child to the long room? You take her, Higgs."

"But it's cold there," Jonathan protested.

His mother patted his shoulder. “She won’t mind that. She is not really here anymore and it is never cold in the place she has gone to.”

“Let me carry her.”

“You carry the lantern, and unlock the door for Mr. Higgs. She’s heavy for you, my love.”

The gravel digger took the body from Jonathan’s failing grip and lifted her as though she weighed no more than a goose. Jonathan lit the way out and round the side to a small stone outbuilding. A thick wooden door gave onto a narrow windowless storeroom. The floor was of plain earth, and the walls had never been plastered or paneled or painted. In summer it was a good place to leave a plucked duck or a trout that you are not yet hungry for; on a winter night like this one it was bitter. Projecting from one wall was a stone slab, and it was here that Higgs laid her down. Jonathan, remembering the fragility of the papier-mâché, cradled her skull—“So as not to hurt her”—as it came into contact with the stone.

Higgs’s lantern cast a circle of light onto the girl’s face.

“Ma said she’s dead,” Jonathan said.

“That’s right, lad.”

“Ma says she’s in another place.”

“She is.”

“She looks as though she’s here, to me.”

“Her thoughts have emptied out of her. Her soul has passed.”

“Couldn’t she be asleep?”

“Nay, lad. She’d’ve woke up by now.”

The lantern cast flickering shadows onto the unmoving face, the warmth of its light tried to mask the dead white of the skin, but it was no substitute for the inner illumination of life.

“There was a girl who slept for a hundred years, once. She was woke up with a kiss.”

Higgs blinked fiercely. “I think that was just a story.”

The circle of light shifted from the girl’s face and illuminated

Higgs's feet as they made their way out again, but at the door he discovered that Jonathan was not beside him. Turning, he raised the lantern again in time to see him stoop and place a kiss on the child's forehead in the darkness.

Jonathan watched the girl intently. Then his shoulders slumped and he turned away.

They locked the door behind them and came away.