

Blackhanded Jack the Butcher

By Richard Paul

The kingdom was torn by a civil war,
In the wake of the death of the king.
His first-born and heir was betrayed by her aunt
Who long had schemed, her niece to supplant,
Promising gifts of the lands she would storm,
To give to the nobles who joined her thieving.

The young Queen proved not the fool the Countess thought
And was ready to face the traitors.
When there marched south from her aunt's county,
Those treason-tainted men of her army,
They were unprepared and doomed once caught
By loyalist troops, in numbers the greater.

Thus at the border of the northern counties,
Amidst a plane of endless snow and stone,
Loyalist and traitor armies clashed,
Spear tips ripped at flesh, iron mattocks thrashed,
Though the faithless Countess was not to be seen,
Yet she did not cower, nor had she flown.

For in the north she'd left her chaff to fall,
On pain of death she'd pressed near every man,
From the blacksmiths to the dung-shovellers.
She'd left thousands to fight and die for her,
Clad in naught stronger than their woollen shawls,
With scant fiercer than sticks in too many hands.

This Countess, meanwhile, took her true army
And she sailed south in a wide half circle.
Set to arrive, as best as could be planned,
On the southern coast whilst the foe held her land.
Two days away lay the capitol and Queen,
Her own kin, who she would gladly strangle.

Her force was small, scarcely one thousand strong,
Yet the strength of the loyalists was elsewhere.
Once her rival in this war was butchered,
What choice would the snipes have except surrender?
Paltry rebellions would not last long,
No inch of disciplining wrath she'd spare.

A village hight Spingham lay near the road
The traitors took to the capitol's gate.
At the Countess's command, five score sped
To pillage provisions for the days ahead.
They were free to pay for their takings with woe,
A display to her enemies of their fate.

Now in Spingham they knew full-well what drew near
For the traitor forces were not subtle.
Most of the folk made haste for the city,
Spurred by rumours of the Countess's "pity".
In an hour's time, all had disappeared,
Save one strange loon who'd planned a rebuttal.

Blackhanded Jack, the old butcher of Spingham

Stood in his shop, armed with his best cleaver.
Never before in his life had he fought,
Nothing of fighting had he ever been taught.
His name he earned when fire claimed his hand,
So that only an ashen husk lingered.

He was too old to flee beside kin and kith,
Though they protested, he'd only slow them down.
Yet for his daughter's and grand-children's sake
A spectacle and bloody mess he'd make,
One to best delay the traitor bastards with
And grant his people the greater stretch of ground.

Sounds of ransacking and worse were soon heard,
And then a booted foot kicked in his door.
In stepped a brace of ham-skulled, armoured knaves,
Behind them, a churl with a grin depraved.
'We're closed.' Said Jack to the intruding curs.
'Now take your unwashed selves out of my store.'

The three laughed swinish laughs, and the weasel
Who stood at the rear came swaggering on.
'Truly you must seek death, you withered fool,
We've come for supplies, and lest you'd make us cruel
Then your tribute of meat must be plentiful
And all must you yield to us anon.

'Think of it, the fare of your humble shop
Shall feed the army of the great Countess
As she takes her rightful place on the throne
And makes this long-neglected land her own.
Tis a glory your long years shall not top,
Open your stores, greybeard, and count yourself blessed.'

Jack laughed so hard he nearly dropped the cleaver.
'If that beast were not grasping, there'd be no war.
Nothing drives her save for power's whispers,
They're urging that soulless monster onwards.
Not one strip of bacon shall I give her,
Long live the true Queen! The old King's first-born.'

The weasel paused a moment, then he nodded.
'Yes, it's hard to argue with aught you've said.
The Countess is an evil, ruthless fiend,
But I am not employed for truth, you see?
I am her herald, such lies must I spread,
The truth I now share... cause you'll soon be dead.'

This herald made to draw his new-bought sword,
Thinking a lazy kill was his to take,
But this leathery, one-handed butcher
In both wits and limb was proved the quicker,
The cleaver bit deep, the bare neck it tore,
A crimson carcass on the floor to make.

The lack-witted lackeys gawped for a trice,
Ere Blackhanded Jack claimed two fingers from one.
They beat the old man till his legs gave out,
Then drew their own swords with murderous shouts
And the dying butcher felt the blades slice
In the final moments ere he was done.

Later, when the pillagers searched his stores,

They found a hundred barrels of salted beef,
With cuttings of fresh venison and pork,
Enough for a thousand men before their walk
To claim the capitol and show their scorn
To the Queen who caused their lady such grief.

They left the plundered village set ablaze,
And bore what they'd stolen to the Countess.
When they made camp that night, there was a feast,
And of the meat they took, near all did eat,
They'd reach the capitol on the next day,
Rested, well fed, rife with dark eagerness.

Yet the day came and went, with no army
Marching to the gates, as the villagers told.
The Queen sent scouts parallel to the road,
To learn how much fear on that next day was owed.
They smelt the answer before any could see
Aught of Blackhanded Jack's vicious scold.

About their camp the Countess's men writhed,
A thousand souls voiding stomachs and bowels.
For the meat they'd eaten had been poisoned,
At a stroke every soldier's grit was gone,
Where the night before they'd been glad and blithe,
Now their spirits, like their britches, were foul.

The Countess herself tried desperately to wrench
Her shaking legs and trembling stomach away.
Through the pain, her rage shone like some Fell sun,
So close! And now so stupidly undone,
With no kingdom but inescapable stench,
No hope, save maybe to be swiftly slain.

Blackhanded Jack had been married many years
To an apothecary, who had taught
Which herbs and plants he could use to season,
And which he must avoid, lest he poison.
The latter he scattered o'er the beef and deer
And then for this poisoned meat he had fought.

He had guessed, and hoped, and been proven right,
That none would question the meat he defended,
Thus the guts of the foe would know such a wrack,
So twisted by the blackened hand of Jack
That now a few hundred city guards might
Easily see these vile traitors ended.

The Queen, when told all, ordered a fire
To completely burn the entire scene.
There must be revenge for a village sacked,
And they risked a plague if they did not act.
The deed and the day was grim and dire
Yet not half so dark as it might have been.

The foolish war ended that very day,
The Countess they found, dead and frozen, that night.
The people rejoiced to be rid of the strife
And celebrations in the realm were rife,
Though heavy the cost, with so many slain,
The end of it all, if naught else, was right.

No one ever did learn the whole story,

Save for we Shadows, who nothing may tell.
Luck, or the Gods' will, was given the credit
For the traitors left swimming in their own shit.
But you at least know the valour and glory,
Of Blackhanded Jack, let this be his knell.

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