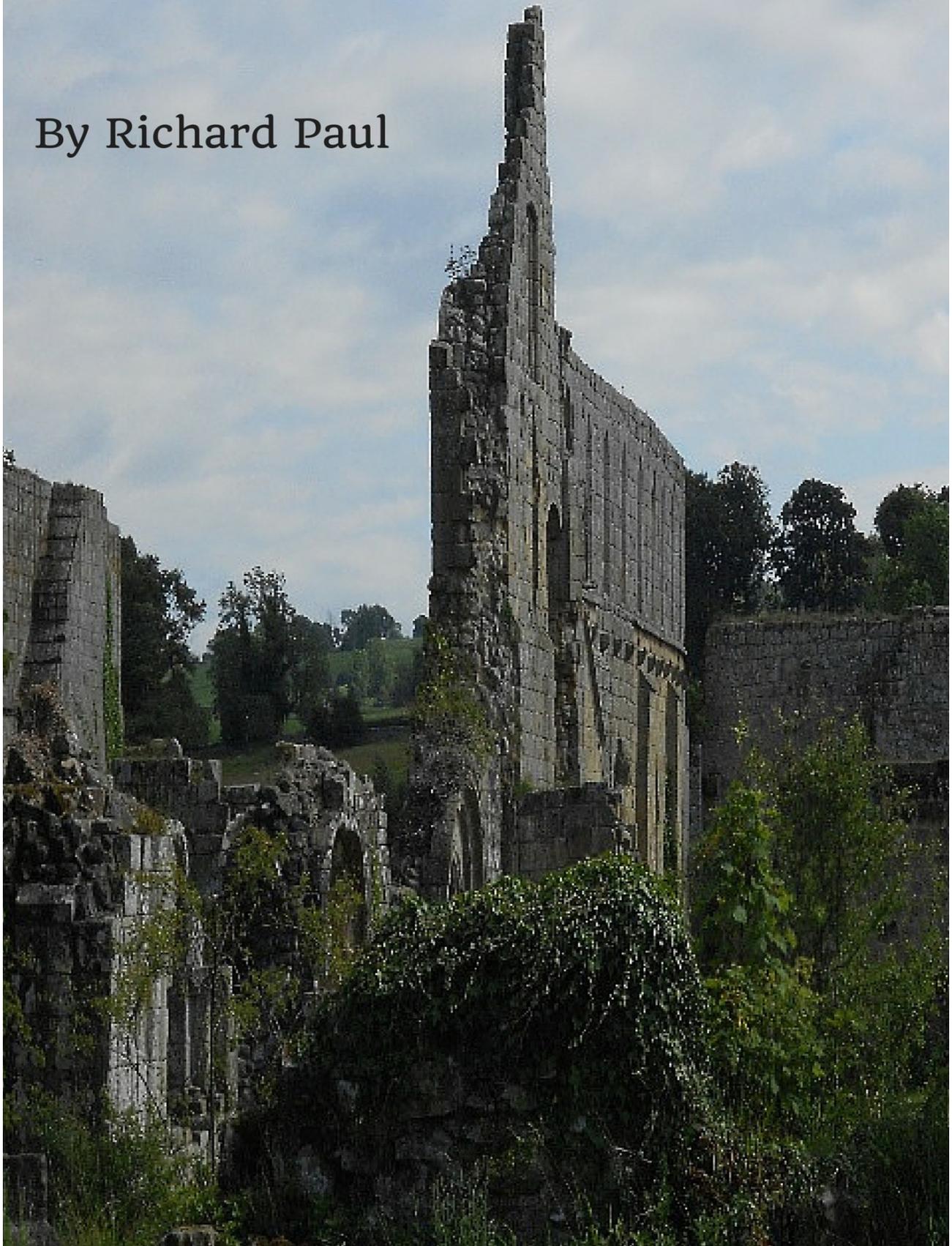


Nellack and Caleara

By Richard Paul



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*Should love and destiny stride hand in hand,
Doubt shall die and misery shall not stand.*

Dedicated to any readers who'd like something dedicated to them.

1.

In dwellings rich, a high hall and stately town,
Each on either edge of the Wolven-wood,¹
There two scions of vassals to the crown
Languished in lives bereft of all joy, good
Only to ruder eyes, which saw, it seemed, renown.
Yet though they were trapped by their world's ways, they would
Not let their futures drag them down to drown.

Nellack, son to Nelladin, was the first.
He was the heir to many southern lands.²
In speech and poise and courtly grace well versed,
Trained with arms as tradition did demand,
His schooling was as a player's part rehearsed,
From true valour and adventure he was banned
Lest his bloodline be risked to face the worst.

Day by day and year by year, on it went,
A life that bored him ceaselessly wore him
Down till less and less were his young eyes bent
To the birds in flight and the Wolf-wood's rim
Which once had, maybe, called to him; 'Relent!
Flee your slavish fate, to Me, dwell within!
Find your true fate in the Wolven-Wood, Relent!'

A child's dream he deemed it be, and paid no heed.

Then came his sixteenth birthday, a day of note;
His father said he was set to marry,
(With a bargain dowry too, he did gloat.)
The daughter of a nearby land's Marquis,
A girl he knew did on his brother dote
And he on her, their love was plain to see,
Yet scorned to serve nobility's blind troat.

With this latest nail his future seemed set,
A cheerless march beside a captive wife,
One day cursing children to the same, and yet
A chance remained for him to sidestep this life
And possibly a kinder future get
For his brother and betrothed; so much strife
He could, with one great sacrifice, offset.

His eyes returned to the far-off Wolf-wood.
And he thought that if he were to flee there now,
To his brother, his inheritance would
Be passed, and his engagement too endowed.
He'd lose the life he resented for good,
Which his brother would bear better anyhow,
But could he survive in the Wolven-Wood?

Yet to actually leave proved for him hard,
Home and family were not lightly shorn
And to leave seemed pure folly, to discard
Even his resented life, a first-born,
Why should he now cast himself down so far?
For weeks he lingered, his heart torn,
But in the end he left, for wood and stars.

2.

The second was the Lady Calera.
Last of six children, unneeded, ignored.
There was no swain nearby to marry her,
No need to make her a higher house's ward.
There *was* a Gold-convent which stood not far³
Away where many daughters had been stored,
Yet this was thought too cruel; the faith was marred⁴.

The Lady had grown up alone within
The halls of her family's ancient keep.
Too low to warrant their pride or chagrin
Her notice was scant, her schooling cheap,
Her truest childhood friend was a jade pen,
Her only joy from worlds she carved in her sleep,
Loneliness ever grew, her soul to darken.

She almost never spoke, there was no need,
Her kin she rarely saw, and most knew her not.
A living ghost in her home, damned indeed,
A wraith atop the battlements where oft
She stood, looking to the ground; would she be free
With one more step? End the pain of her lot?
At such a time came the whisper from the trees.

'Lift your eyes, see freedom on the horizon.'

Was this voice mere madness? She was not sure.
Could she dwell in the Woods? She did not care.
Escape, at last, tore at her with its lure.
The Wolf-Woods promised freedom, so she'd go there.
All she needed to survive she procured,
A few small tokens of the keep she snared,
And no one saw as she stepped out the door.

Dark and heavy storm clouds hung o'er her track,
A biting wind tore at her o'er the wide plains
And rain beat down upon her burdened back;
Nature tested the girl's resolve through pain
But she pressed on, enduring Earth's attack,
For the trees at the horizon, to gain
That life, that ceaseless sensation which she lacked.

A grudging sun emerged when she reached the trees
At dawn; the whole night she'd spent in trudging
And though this new domain she wished to see,
Weary, she stumbled only to a clearing
And on a stretch of sheltered grass she dreamed
Of sunlight and summer breezes whistling
Through boughs rife with nests and leaves of shining green.

The ways of woodlands she had long studied;
She knew enough to forage and raise fire,
To find the River Ujee, it's waters clear and clean,⁵
To take shelter when the weather turned dire.
And all these tasks she gladly did, for glee
Now blossomed in her heart and transpired
To outwit her gloom, but how long could this be?

3.

Nellack too was versed enough in woodland lore,
Though he found scant delight in a wild life.
The comfort he'd forsworn he missed most sore
And everywhere were beasts and beetles rife.
Was this his future? A bed on muddy floors?
Skinning maggoty deer with a stolen knife?
Falling to degradation more and more?

He thought back to all he had left behind
Which now looked not so foul as once it had,
Nor life within the Woods a fate more kind.
Foolish then his acts seemed, deeds of a cad
Yet for his brother's future's sake he must find
Some way to make long years bearable and
Forge fair days from all to which he was consigned.

His thought and eye soon turned towards the North
To lands scarce known, beyond the Wolven-Woods.
Perhaps there a town dwelt, whence he might set forth
And find therein a life worthy and good.
Tarrying for neither planning nor thought
He moved to flee as swiftly as he could
From the damp and dank his recklessness had wrought.

To where the name of Nellack may stand forgot.

Calera found first nought but pure bliss,
Engulfed within the veil of endless trees.
She deigned not think of all she had dismissed,
Craving no comfort nor any prior ease.
Delighting to be lost in the green abyss,
Till time begat familiarity
And day by day life felt the more amiss.

In the Keep or in the Woods, she was alone,
No tree nor owl nor star answered her calls.
Her bliss faltered and loneliness, left prone
Since her flight, arose anew and galled
At being cast out, it tore her to the bone.
Like before, no creature paid heed to her squalls
All her pain, she learned, she could not disown.

Bright paths she ran through recently seemed bleak,
Her daily labours turned to slavish toil,
Melancholy's leaching hold left her weak,
Her dream of lifelong freedom had been foiled.
She despaired of her lofty dream and meek
She lay down, yielding to her mind's spoil
And closed her eyes, for now an end did she seek.

But unlooked for, her eyes opened again,
After a fever she'd taken had passed.
Her body was weak and in constant pain,
Yet warmed by a fire that she did not start
And wrapped in her blanket, though she had not lain
In it during her stupor. Now with a start
She turned and saw Nellack, her life he'd sustained.

4.

Nellack had wound his way northward slowly,
Through a brace of weeks until resting
One day beside a bend in the Ujee
He heard above the breeze the sound of weeping
And following it he found beneath a tree
Caleara, wasted and shivering
With not long to live, lest he intervene.

Caleara saw this man and thought she dreamed
In the lingering grasp of delusion,
And each time she fell back asleep she deemed
She'd wake to see no more of this illusion
And yet as her senses slowly rallied
There still was this intruder in seclusion,
Sat near and silent beyond the realm of dreams.

Standing and bowing, old habits recalled,
Nellack began to tell of what had passed
But Caleara raised her hand and stalled
His words, and hushed him each question he asked.
She would not speak either, once more enthralled
By a surely fated happening cast
To her, and at once was her grief forestalled.

The Wolf, and his servant, sat and waited.

Nellack knew nothing of her, not her name,
Nor her past nor how she came to this place.
He knew only the tunes she hummed, the same
She spluttered in sickness but now she graced
The air with her true voice. He knew her games
And dances and how laughter brightened her face,
And soon he knew his heart was set aflame.

She knew nothing of him, but his heart,
Both kind and caring, whose like she had not seen.
As with her kin, for him, she had no part,
No, point nor purpose, no need of her had he
And still he'd tended her, and thus restart
Her resolve to live amongst the Wolf's trees;
She could endure, she knew, lest they moved apart.

Nellack knew his task was done, he could leave
And press on to a new life in northern lands.
But now he wished not half so well to achieve
This goal, unless he could leave hand in hand
With his dear mystery, but he perceived
In her contentment, she'd not abandon
This home of hers; thus roots he'd try to weave.

He stayed beside her through long and chilly weeks
Together they dwelt, these two by fate paired
And all the while she would not hear him speak
Yet cheerful all the same was the time they shared.
And soon they slept beneath the same quilt; for heat,
And soon each bathed careless of what they bared,
And soon the two were lovers, as was meet.

5.

A swift year passed beneath the canopy
Of a woodland corner that echoed mirth.
Cherished days yielded hours of glee,
Fair nights they passed entwined upon the Earth,
And soon their camp grew to a home worthy
Of two who meant to dwell in the woodlands
Till all their long, bright days ended peacefully.

And still they spoke no words throughout this year
And scarce were they apart in those happy days,
Suffering no worldly words to interfere,
Nor any fear that either be borne away,
To smirch in any way their long denied cheer.
All their lives, perhaps, they might have had their way
But fate had plans for the lovers, that was clear.

They took to venturing through their new domain,
Finding shallow caves, deep hollows and streams;
With natural bounties stretched out every way
They wandered where they would, and mutely deemed
The Woods were theirs and whatever they fained
Do within their realm was their right. They were free,
Till they found the Wolven City; Shaoltrane⁶

Overgrown, desolate and abandoned.

Tales once were told of this city of old,
Before they were extinguished by the gold scourge.⁷
To Nellack and Caleara this cold
And crumbled, empty, ivy festooned dirge
Of a homeland was a dirge untold.
All through the day and clear-skied night they searched
To see what answers this ruin did hold.

Hands clasped, never leaving each other's sight,
They stalked the streets, marked mingled blood and shadows
And wisps of ashen thatch near homes set alight.
At midday they found a pit where black bones
Were heaped, a testament to the grim blight
That had destroyed this city long ago,
Destroyed it all, maliciously, outright.

Yet one more soul dwelt in defiled Shaoltrane,
The lovers found her when, with dawn nearing,
To an almost pleasant grass-park they came,
By now they thought there less cause for fearing.
It was Nellack who saw it first, more profane
Than any horror left here festering.
Forgetting his silence, a curse he exclaimed.

Set on a broken chair in rotting raiment
Was a grinning skeleton, run clear through
And pinioned by an iron spear, which rent
Her heart in yesteryears, and yet this hew
Had failed, and as the young lovers bent
Unwilling eyes toward the corpse they knew
This fleshless body's life was not yet spent.

6.

No word it spoke, yet they could feel its greeting
It had no eyes yet they could feel its stare.
They sensed its satisfaction at this meeting
And heard in their souls that it had brought them there.
One arm, devoid of muscle, in a fleeting
Ghastly flick lifted from the crumbled chair
And brushed against the spear. Macabrely treating.

'Remove it.' Was the bidding, 'Remove it.'
They felt the command again and again
And stood unmoving, frightened from their wits
Such living death was beyond the world's ken⁸
And growing terror drove them almost to flit
Away back down the desolated lanes
To their trees, and all this lunacy forget.

But ere their legs could bear them from the dead,
Out of the air they heard whispers emerge,
Hints of pipes and lute strings, playing not dread
As the grim surrounds suggested; no dirge
But music for a wedding. Scents of bread
And roasted meat and cakes and stew all merged,
Then sounds of shoes on grass, where phantoms did tread.

Last came the sight of these ghosts of the Wolf Folk.

A memory played viscous before their eyes;
A joyful wedding day in this dead place.
Guests danced and sang and drank 'neath summer skies
Whilst impish children pilfered snacks and raced
About the flower-strewn grounds where they vied
With their fellows in games noisy and crazed.
Over all this the Matriarch did preside.⁹

The fleshless, deathless body on the chair
Now to the sight seemed to be a woman
Ancient in years and made weary by cares,
Hunched on her throne, eyes shut and old skin wan
Her face buried beneath her silver hair,
Resting since the festivities began,
Left in peace to languish in the warm air.

Minutes passed, and then a mighty sound
Of horns and drums marked the wedding's commencement.
Athwart two woven rugs the guests sat down
As the bride, groom and all their attendants
Emerged, clad in brown jerkins or long green gowns,
Garb of the Wolf's folk, earthen yet resplendent.
Colours of the Wolf's Faith, worldly and proud.

The bride was granddaughter to the Matriarch,
The groom was a hunter, in skill matched by none.
Up to the sacred stone circle they marched¹⁰
Where waited the druid, the Matriarch's son,
Leaning on his alder staff, smiling to mark
How happy had his daughter now become.
But ere they reached the circle, the day turned dark.

7.

New horns sounded from afar, then came the roars
Of war dogs and men charging, scenting prey.
Flames and screams flew out from behind smashed doors,
The guests all stood, confused, shivering, afraid,
To face a tide, fangs and swords trailing gore,
Killing every living thing they found that day,
Armoured men, three hundred strong, bringing slaughter.

The Wolven folk lived lives of peace, they could
Not resist such sudden, senseless evil.
Overwhelmed, they died ere they understood
Why this horror was happening, whose will,
Whose rancid will, had brought death to their Woods?
But Nellack and Caleara knew the sigil
Emblazoned on each killer's surcoat; Gold Hoods.

The 'Gold Hood', as worn by Saint Garrahow
As he led the charge 'gainst the Twisted Mages;¹¹
He cast them and their Demon Master down;
The first legend of the earliest age
Which ended with conquering Saint crowned
A King and swiftly raising armies to wage¹²
Bloody war on every evil he found.

Many Kings and Faiths slavishly aped his deeds.

Most recent and most hated by decent lands,
The 'Faith of Garrahow' or 'The Gold Hood's Blades',
For Saint and God they bore the sword and brand,
Ever striving to see evil unmade
And all its vulgar nests and dens unmanned,
But their zealot eyes and meatless minds fain
See evil in all whom they did not command¹³.

The young lovers who found Shaltrane by chance
Saw the young bride and groom overwhelmed by hounds.
Caleara, enraged, took up a fallen branch
And searched about herself, squinting, till she found
a killer, his sword red, and perchance
To save more from his blade, she swiftly downed
the branch. It passed straight through him, and she blanched.

Nellack ran after his love, to deter her
And saw her stroke pass through her foe, as through air.
The killed paid no heed and made no stir
When struck, on he went with long strides to bear
Down on a fallen mother who called after
Her fleeing children: tarry not to despair,
Get out of the city, escape these curs.

Nellack knelt down beside her, reaching out,
He tried to help her stand, help her escape
But his hands passed straight through her, and without
Time to wonder at this new strangeness, shapes
Of metal, blade, hilt, gauntlet, throughout
His chest sped, and the mother's entrails scraped,
And Nellack's heart froze to hear her final shout.

8.

What few could flee were pursued by the horde,
Leaving the bodies of the wedding guests prone,
Pawed by stray looters, whilst hounds engorged
On still-warm meat. Over all this, on her throne,
The Matriarch observed, already gored
By the iron spear, now left to die alone,
But death, by law, must wait. She was the Wolf's ward.¹⁴

Slowly the scene of slaughter faded back,
The bodies and the flames all disappeared,
The scores of scents from murder and sack
Vanished, leaving only the ruins, long-seared,
And last the screams that now were distant and lacked
The number of voices they first did hear,
Fell silent at last with all the screamers hacked.

Nellack and Caleara stood searching,
She with her branch raised, he with shaking arms,
For the recently salient razing,
The foul, craven, unforgettable harm
In what was now once more a pleasant clearing
Of a ruin to which nature had wrought charm.
They saw only the strange skeleton, staring.

'Remove it.' They heard again. 'Remove it.'

Caleara did not hesitate now
And ran to where the Matriarch waited
Taking the rusting spear and wrenching it out.
Nellack followed, not to hinder nor berate
But in the Southern custom for grief, he bowed
Low to the Matriarch and touched his pate
To his palms, e're to share her pain, was the vow.

Slowly, with unnatural vitality,
The Matriarch pushed her worn bones upright
Her fingers fought against the wind mightily
To touch the young ones who had lessened her plight.
Neither of them could hold still easily,
To see the fleshless bones draw near was a fright
But they held fast, trusting to civility.

Hands fell to their shoulders, slithering on,
The Matriarch's arms closed behind their backs
Then with sudden speed her body fell upon
Nellack and Caleara with a clack,
And they flinched to feel this carcass they'd donned,
They could not help but think they were attacked,
But it was an embrace to which they'd been drawn.

'Long have I called to you both; drawing you..'
They felt these words like wind inside a shell.
'Long have I whispered to your hearts, guiding you.
Twas I who called you to the Wolf's Woods to dwell.
And I who chose the paths which drew you to
Each other. You'd fall in love, I knew that well,
And long have I awaited you. I need you.'

9.

She bid them sit down and then long she told
Of the Wolven creed and deeds, its life and strife,
From the God in Wolf's shape, Lathoohl the Old,
Who wrought one quarter if the World for his wife
To be, Saiyeo, who is the Moon, to behold.¹⁵
On the history wove, through years when rife
Were the Wolf's Folk, and through the Woods were sprawled.

She told of a foolish war, Wolf 'gainst Hound,¹⁶
Brother Gods and all their children at arms.
Two generations' worth of blood-washed ground
Till the brothers learned wisdom, halting their harm.
Of their followers left alive, most found
New paths, and those who stayed henceforth disarmed
The Wolf and his folk to peace now were bound.

Though this in turn led to the quiet and end
The two lovers beheld; their life of peace,
And quiet contentment; they could not defend
Themselves and by day's end, all were deceased;
Shaoitrane ransacked and left to descend
Out of sight and memory, all had ceased,
With only corpses left for foxes to tend.

Until now, with two new acolytes come.

When all was told, the Matriarch knelt down
And took Calera's hand in her own.
'I have a question girl, look you around
And see where I have dwelt long years alone;
This city was once the Wolf's Hallowed ground,
Will you inherit and restore these stones?
Be named my daughter, and take up the Wolf's crown?'

'And you boy, will you at last take her hand?
Will you marry she whom you love this day?
Become my son in law and all this land
Govern by her side, the mark of death allay
By leading new folk here, teach them to stand
Against an inevitable future fray?
Will you both make a third Wolven Kingdom grand?'

Nellack and Calera sat and thought
Looking to each other, conversing silent
They soon knew the other believed they aught
To do this thing, destiny surely sent
Them to this place, and both he and she had sought,
A home to belong in, it was why they went
To the Wolven-Wood; now home they'd been brought.

And as for marriage, what question was there
For two lovers linked together by fate?
The year they'd spent together free from care
Had proved beyond all doubt to both that no mate
Besides the one they'd chanced upon was there.
It was time for them to be wed and create
A home for those who, like they'd been, were ensnared.¹⁷

10.

They washed and mended old wedding raiment
Stashed in a house that had not burned so well;
From rags and sticks they fashioned makeshift tents
And down them, in defiance of the knell
That long had lingered in this shrine of lament,
The lovers emerged as fair summer rains fell
And down the rotten rugs to the circle went.

There the Matriarch stood, her son's staff gripped tight,
And marked how happy her daughter had become,
And her betrothed too, she thought they might
Indeed revive the Wolven Kingdom from
Its wrongful death, but even if the fight
Was too great, at least she'd live to see
The scum who butchered all thwarted ere night.

She spoke the words of the ceremony,
Nellack and Caleara spoke at last.
He heard her pledge herself with words honied,
She heard him do the same in tones of brass,
At last, to signify their matrimony
The two clasped their hands atop the outstretched staff
And thus they stood, now reborn and married.

There too, at last, each learned the other's name.

The Matriarch's hand slipped suddenly to her side
And in a swoon she fell onto the stone
Her children watched in sudden shock, their eyes wide
But her phantom voice inside their heads groaned:
'Do not fear my loves, tis past my time to die.
My task is done, the curse lifted from my bones.
Farewell, live long for me and with joy abide.'

Long they both wept for the mother they had found,
Then taking up her bones they laid her to rest
Inside a barrow her kin raised out the ground.¹⁸
Ever more, peaceful Earth, not iron-pierced breast
Would cause her stillness; painless sleep, unbound.
Nellack and Caleara, at her behest,
Went home, and began to plan for the Wolf's test.

Of Nellack and Caleara, more tales are told.
Of the refugees and outcasts they took
To their banner, of Wolf cities four-fold,
Of their son, who hight the Father of Rooks
And their daughter, the Bane of hooded gold,
Of the war that all the Wolven-quarter shook
And yet more lost to reckoning and untold.

But this tale ends with a fair summer's night,
With a newly-wed pair stood beneath the moon.
Neither could have hoped to find love with their flight
From cosy hearths and lives they strove to impugn,
Now here they were, their quest ending in delight,
A future of greatness waiting to be hewn
By those whom the world had lost from its sight.

Notes

1. A massive swathe of woodland stretching across the Kingdom of Torbadif like a belt. Supposedly named for the multitude of wolves that once roamed there, long since purged by the 'Gold Hood's Blades.' (More details on them follow.)
2. The Dukedom of Santhire, encompassing approximately one third of the Kingdom.
3. Scion of the minor Barony of Dringthire, a small land of four villages and fifteen farmsteads.
4. 'Gold Convents' were holy sanctums wherein cloistered women served as effective servants to the knights and higher echelons of the Faith (of Garrahow (More details below)). Though all in the Faith were sworn to celibacy, abuse, sexual assault and pregnancy were typically rife in such places.
5. The longest river in the world, stretching from the Wither-peak, winding through Torbadif and the Wolven-Woods and coming at last to the Novaraim Sea.
6. Meaning 'First Den'. This was the city built by the Wolf God Lathoohl for his first human followers.
7. 'Gold scourge' refers to the Faith of Garrahow or 'Faith of the Gold Hood'. All writings or history which conflicted with their own doctrine was suppressed and destroyed as a matter of course.
8. Almost all forms of magic had fallen out of practice in Torbadif decades ago and all knowledge of their existence had become legend and folklore.
9. By tradition, Wolven cities were ruled by whichever local woman was deemed the wisest by popular opinion. Typically this was someone of advanced years, well travelled and experienced in the ways of the world.
10. The first stone the Wolf laid when constructing the city.
11. Mortal servants of the Demon King Athibarlakarth, who allegedly brought infernal magic to the World and 'gifted' it to mankind as part of his plan of conquest. This magic led to severe disfigurement and eventual insanity in those who used it, and was the first branch of magic that the Faith strove to extinguish.
12. King of the 'Golden Kingdom', which fell into decline almost instantly after his death. Hushed voices attribute this to his obsession with fighting evil which left him without a wife or heir.
13. Specifically the followers of the Heron, the Stingray, the Hound and the Wolf.
14. Immortality was granted by the Wolf to one living servant at a time, to ensure that His following could never truly die out.
15. Legend has it that the entire World was four separate wedding presents created by the four God-brothers. The Wolf made his quarter for Saiyeo, the Moon; the Hound made his for 'Hethanaer' the Sun; the Heron made his for 'Ailibatandri' the Sky and the Stingray made his for 'Shilaeen' the nomadic water which became the Seas.
16. A war which started when a village of Wolf followers moved into the Hound's lands. The Wolf mistakenly assumed they'd been lured away by his brother and the Hound mistakenly assumed they'd been sent to provide the Wolf with an excuse for invading.
17. Torbadif boasted a considerable number of young runaways, not to mention residents of villages displaced by bandits and people driven to live in the wild by oppressive laws and taxation.
18. Barrow of the family of Masharah; wherein ten generations and five Matriarchs were entombed.