

The Claymere Fables

as retold by

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This document was most recently revised on Tuesday, February 23, 2010.

This document is approximately 5,420 words long.

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These fables are my versions of stories that I've gleaned from the folklore of America. The ideas for the fables aren't originally mine. However, these versions of the fables are mine. The setting, Claymere, is entirely my own creation.

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The Fable of Good Queen Genevieve

This story was first completed on Saturday, April 9, 1994 and was most recently revised on Tuesday, February 23, 2010.

Once upon a time, long long ago, in a kingdom far away, there lived a king. This king's name was Richard, and the name of his kingdom was Claymere. Richard was a very good king, as kings go. However, as with all kings, whatever kings may say to the contrary, he was only human. That might have led King Richard into much greater folly than what he actually experienced, except for one thing. King Richard enjoyed a benefit not possessed by any other king, ever, and that was the unobtrusive guidance and unassuming wisdom of his wife, the Good Queen Genevieve.

One day, there came into the service of the castle a new chambermaid. She was a healthy, robust young wench, fresh from the farm. When properly cleaned and attired she proved to be quite comely. I hasten to insist that her employment was, at the time that it began, completely unknown to King Richard. She'd been selected by interview from among the many folk of the kingdom who, eager to better themselves, often applied for work at the castle. The castle staff was, in those days, notoriously informal and this comely wench had been interviewed by an underling who was normally in the service of the Royal Falconer. It just happened that the falconer didn't need him for anything on that particular day. He'd been in the kitchen, flirting with the Royal Chef's assistants, and someone had sent him to help with the interviews. Had one of the queen's personal retainers interviewed the wench, then things might have been very different. Then, the healthy young lass might have been rejected and, returning to her village, spent the rest of her days as the wife of some laboring yokel, bearing noisy brats and rearing the bumpkins to sturdy serfhood. At the very least, she'd have been assigned to some location well away from the king. Instead, she was interviewed not by anyone on the queen's personal staff but by the falconer's boy, who didn't have any experience at all in the subtleties of genteel demeanor. Falconers are, at their very best, a rowdy lot, not renowned for their judgment outside of aviculture. So the young wench, Hyacinth by name, was admitted into the king's personal service.

It's important to be aware that, at the time, King Richard and his queen had been married for 21 years. Thus, the king (and presumably the queen as well, although wives were not so outspoken in those days as they are now) had twice endured the distractions of the Seven Year Itch which, by the time that Hyacinth arrived, had once again come upon them. King Richard again experienced those indefinable feelings of yearning and the depressing sense of dissatisfaction through which, it seems, each married couple must pass, at least if their marriage is to endure. Added to that was the king's growing conviction that he was no longer a stripling. Indeed, clues to that conclusion were accumulating beyond even the efforts of his loyal retinue to allay them. Those worthy knights generously (and wisely) showered compliments of a therapeutic nature upon their king. In spite of their valiant efforts, no amount of flattery could hide from the king the fact that, for example, he was distinctly balding. Even the banishment of mirrors from his chambers could not hide the knowledge, for his crown no longer sat so easily upon his head as it had

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in the past. When donned, it was distinctly cold. The knights no longer challenged the king, even in jest, and they found excuses to avoid the physical contests of mock combat that once had formed a normal and enjoyable part of his daily routine. His raiment had gone through progressively larger versions until his robe had become a veritable tent. Indeed, the crowning jewel (if I may use such a phrase) in his discomfort was the surprise ball given him on his 41st birthday. The queen had intended well. The ball was one of her very few mistakes. I can only presume that she, too, was dealing with her third bout of the Seven Year Itch. The king had tried to forget about his impending birthday and viewed the ball as an inconvenient reminder. Thus it was that on the first day of her new duties, Hyacinth began her chores in the vicinity of a king who was in such a mood of despondency that scarcely anything in his kingdom could rouse in him the slightest interest or enthusiasm.

King Richard was, as I have said (all things considered) quite a good king. He lacked any desire to harm anyone, a commendable attitude in a king. He particularly did not wish to annoy his beloved wife, the Good Queen Genevieve. Thus it was that for the next pair of weeks, King Richard put forth a manly resistance to the new temptation. He fought within himself a battle that would have been the envy of any beleaguered general in the field. At last, however, he was overwhelmed and Hyacinth assumed another duty (if I may call it that) which was probably not, after all, a particularly unusual one, all things considered, people being what they are, and after all King Richard was only human.

The new state of affairs might have gone unnoticed indefinitely, for after 21 years of marriage the king and his queen had achieved what might be most gracefully viewed as a platonic relationship. It might have gone unnoticed, that is, had it not been for the sudden and uncharacteristic boisterous good humor of the king. Indeed, his exuberance began to ignite the entire population of the castle into an extravagance of celebration. Now, a woman who has been married to the same man, even a queen who has been married to the same king, for 21 years can scarcely fail to notice such a stunning change in the behavior of her spouse. The queen most assuredly noticed the change. She knew that there were only two possibilities. It was either the king's second childhood or something else. She immediately began to search for the something else.

Queen Genevieve, who was wise with her years, found little difficulty in discovering the source of the change. That is to say, she discovered it right away. Once she was certain of the dalliance within her king's chambers, she could simply have had the unfortunate chambermaid eliminated. Such a thing certainly was within her power. She had ample access to the Royal Huntsman, the Royal Butcher, the Royal Sabermaster, the Royal Alchemist, and many other Royal employees who could have dispatched the wench most handily, not to mention the Royal Executioner who, as it happened, had very little to occupy his time in such a peaceful kingdom. Perhaps in her younger days, the queen might even have resorted to some such drastic measure. However, she was of that fortunate breed to whom age lends perspective. So, she retired quietly to her own chambers to ponder the matter. Having pondered, she acted.

Her first act, indeed it seemed at first to be her only act, was to have Hyacinth transferred from the king's personal service into her own. There was, of course, an immediate benefit to the move. With the chambermaid in the queen's personal service, opportunities for mischief were somewhat reduced. That, however, wasn't the main reason for the change, for the queen had a strategy. The queen well knew, for she was by no means naive, that regardless of where she hid the hapless chambermaid, the king would endeavor to search her out. The queen lacked any wish to become involved in some complicated sequence of espionage and counterespionage and, in any case, she preferred to solve the problem in a way that would cause a minimum of stress for her good husband, who she loved in spite of his various faults. Therefore, she knew that a more fundamental solution to the problem was necessary. That was why she placed Hyacinth within her own personal service.

The queen found many things for Hyacinth to do and always those things were in the near vicinity of the queen. Soon, they were as old friends. The chambermaid attended to the queen's every personal need and the queen was especially companionable with her. She even surprised herself by enjoying the chambermaid's company. The chambermaid's fears and inhibitions dissolved and soon she fell into the habit of chattering incessantly. That, of course, was just what the Good Queen Genevieve had wanted. Before long, the queen knew all about Hyacinth's life prior to her attendance in the castle. She knew all of the dreary details of the births, deaths, trials and tribulations, marriages, injuries, livestock, sicknesses, crop failures, and all of the other petty details with which the common folk prefer to fill their lives. That information, as it turned out, did in fact open the queen's eyes to some things that needed correcting in the kingdom. The good queen did what she could to correct those things and, ultimately, the kingdom was the better for it. However, it was with special attention that Queen Genevieve listened whenever Hyacinth prattled about her own self. At last, the Good Queen Genevieve found the tool that she needed to solve the problem of the king's dalliance. Late that very evening, Queen Genevieve set her plan into motion. She had some very special late night instructions for the Royal Confectioner and before another day began, a change took place within the castle.

When Hyacinth arose the next morning to prepare the queen's bath, she found beside her bed a bowl of chocolate morsels. With a small cry of delight, she sampled them until they were quite gone. Chocolate, it turned out, was her chief culinary delight, her main weakness in life. She simply could not resist the stuff. Before she had entered the castle, there had been little that Hyacinth could do to appease her craving for chocolate, peasants having after all more urgent needs for their scant resources. However, the queen lacked any such limitations and thereafter Hyacinth always awoke to a bowl of chocolate. Another bowl always occupied a convenient place near her bed when she retired for the evening. Sometimes it was cashews covered with chocolate. Sometimes raisins. Sometimes cherries. Always wonderful. The Royal Confectioner quite outdid himself, time and time again, such was his dedication to the queen.

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At every meal, a bowl of chocolate sat before Hyacinth, within easy reach. The Royal Chef prepared, just for her, hot chocolate syrup for her pancakes. She had chocolate flavored milk. She never tired of the abundance of chocolate delights for the queen had wisely admonished both the Royal Chef and the Royal Confectioner to make certain that such variety existed in the sweets presented to Hyacinth that her taste for chocolate would never become dulled or sated.

The Royal Seamstress also received her special instructions and she was well prepared. At the first instant of need, she sprang into action. Hyacinth was never aware that her wardrobe was quietly adjusted to her girth from one week to the next. The Royal Carpenter was judiciously instructed and mirrors were carefully removed from the normal haunts of Hyacinth and cunningly replaced by other decorations that hid the mirrors' absence. Over a period of about three months, Hyacinth blissfully achieved a weight of almost 20 stone which in today's measure is, well, quite a lot.

King Richard dared not complain of his burgeoning paramour, so he gradually resumed his interest in his falcons and his hounds, remembering always with affection the good times past with Hyacinth. He, of course, hadn't any idea of the plot against her, nor did she herself.

Hyacinth eventually became jaded on chocolate in spite of everything that the Royal Chef and the Royal Confectioner could do but, by then, their jobs were well done. The queen's plot was a complete success. The Royal Confectioner was given a long vacation, with the queen's most sincere blessings. The Royal Confectioner's absence provided a golden opportunity for his able apprentice to try his hand at cookies, which gained much popularity in the castle after the deluge of chocolate. He had great success with every variety except for chocolate chip cookies, which were always thereafter an embarrassing memory for him.

Hyacinth's weight slowly dropped back to a less cumbersome but still portly 15 stone and, thereafter, the Royal Seamstress was also able to take a vacation, although not so long a one as the Royal Confectioner because a local girlfriend of the Crown Prince turned up pregnant. When the Crown Prince decided to marry her there was again a need for an adjustable wardrobe within the castle, but that's another story.

The Royal Confectioner had been greatly impressed by Hyacinth's capacity for, and love of, chocolate. His professional pride quite overcame him. When he returned from his vacation, he began a persistent courtship of Hyacinth and eventually they were wed.

King Richard lived to a ripe old age and died quietly in his sleep one night, dreaming lovingly of Hyacinth, as she had been when she was young.

Hyacinth gave many years of faithful service to the Good Queen Genevieve, of whom she was the uncontested favorite. Hyacinth never lacked for anything, nor did her family. However, the story of Hyacinth the Chambermaid wasn't officially known until the Royal Scribe recorded it at the deathbed of the Good Queen

Genevieve, who lived more than a hundred years and remained bright and spry to her final day. Hyacinth, in attendance as always, was astounded by the tale, having never suspected the subterfuge that had taken place so many years before. They both laughed until they cried, and hugged one another determinedly, until the Royal Scribe complained bitterly of the tears that smeared his ink while he leaned close to catch the queen's faint narration, and tried to write it down.

There was never another queen who equaled Genevieve in the skillful and unobtrusive solution of difficult problems and her example served the kingdom well until its end, many years later. Even today, her wisdom evokes a nostalgic sense of loss and admiration among the descendants of her people.

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The Fable of Andrew the Pious

This story was first completed on Wednesday, September 21, 1994 and was most recently revised on Tuesday, February 23, 2010.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, there were heavy rains in the mountains of northern Claymere, and the Running River flooded. The storm was clearly visible from the few villages in the valley. There was thunder, lightning, and great sheets of distant grey rain, so the flood didn't catch anyone by surprise. Indeed, such floods had occasionally happened in the history of Claymere. The folk of the region had a long tradition of taking a holiday when the floodwaters rose.

When the storm began, most of the people in the river villages drove their herds to higher pastures, moved vulnerable possessions to higher ground, packed picnic lunches, and prepared for a festive occasion. Their houses were simple and easily repaired or even replaced if necessary. Their brand of stoicism was, whenever possible, laced with gay festivity.

The festive nature of the folk of Claymere was a thorn in the side of the Holy Church, which frowned upon the frivolous. The Holy Church, at the time of that particular flood, had recently built a chapel in the village of Bend, on the verge of the Running River. That chapel was under the supervision of a priest named Andrew Lackley, also known as Andrew the Pious. Andrew scorned the gay abandon with which the folk of Claymere approached life. He was determined not only to convert them to the gloomy precepts of the Holy Church but also to darken their outlook in general. Thus, as the population fled uphill in a mood of merriment, joking about the manure that they would not have to shovel, he exhorted them to remain. He loudly extolled the virtues of prayer as the proper way to meet an emergency. He knelt outside of the chapel, by way of example. The people laughed and advised him to pray hard. A few of the less devout inquired as to his ability to pray and tread water at the same time. Andrew the Pious wasn't amused.

As the flood waters rose, Andrew climbed first up the stairs into the chapel and then up the ladder into the choir loft. There he prayed.

"Oh Lord, please save me from this flood!"

The flood waters rose further and Andrew would have been trapped in the loft had not a huge log rammed into the wall and opened a gaping hole. Andrew climbed out thereby and onto the roof, where he prayed.

"Oh Lord, merciful and loving, please save me from this terrible flood!"

As Andrew prayed, a man in a boat came drifting upon the flood. The man had a long white beard, thick white hair, and beside him in the boat lay a long and sturdy staff. Seeing Andrew, the man grabbed the staff, strove mightily, and was able to guide his boat to the edge of the roof.

"Come on!" he cried. "I can't hold 'er here ferever!"

"Thank you for your kind offer, my Brother!" yelled Andrew, "But you may go your way with my blessing. The Lord will save me!"

"Whatever..." mumbled the man.

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He shoved his boat away from the chapel and drifted away on the flood. He was quickly out of sight. Andrew the Pious prayed.

“Oh Dear and Merciful God, loving and forgiving, hear me I pray in my time of great need! Please save me from this terrible flood!”

Andrew felt a jolt and looked around. There was a raft lodged against the chapel. On the raft were two small children, clutching to themselves a few meager possessions.

“Get on! Get on!” they shrieked. “We’re slippin’ back into tha stream!”

“Go in peace, my children,” blessed Andrew. “I have no need of a space upon your raft. There might yet be others in greater need than I. Go! The Lord will save me!”

Just then, the raft slipped past the corner of the chapel and floated away. Then the chapel began to groan and sway ominously. Andrew prayed.

“Oh, Dear and Mighty Lord on High, most powerful and merciful, who sees even the fall of a tiny sparrow, now in the extremity of my need I do beseech — ”

At that point the chapel collapsed.

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In their sunlit pasture in the lower foothills, the folk of Bend sang and danced, ate seedcakes and sweetmeats, drank mead, told stories, and watched the floodwaters in the valley below. The storm had been violent, but brief. Early the next morning they were able to return to their homes, where they began to remove debris and to rebuild or replace such structures as needed it. Of Andrew the Pious, they found no trace at all. To their surprise, but not (I must admit) to their disappointment, even the chapel was gone. A fluke of the flood had undercut the bank of the Running River near the structure. It had collapsed entirely. Even the wood had floated away. They never knew the end of Andrew the Pious. If they failed to mourn his passing, it was only because they were not by nature a mournful folk.

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At the Pearly Gates, Andrew the Pious was overcome with Righteous Rage.

“Why,” he demanded “didn't you save me? I was pure. I never sinned! And I lived in that wretched, filthy little village and tried to save the Souls of those unworthy, ignorant yokels! When the flood came, I made an example of myself. I prayed fervently!”

“We tried to save you.” replied the Voice. “You would not be saved.”

“But I wanted to be saved!” objected Andrew. “It’s all I was praying for!”

“Well, what did you expect?” answered the Voice. “After all, We sent you a log, a boat, and a raft.”

The Fable of Baron Hale

This story was first completed on Wednesday, July 20, 1994 and was most recently revised on Tuesday, February 23, 2010.

Once upon a time, long long ago, in the Kingdom of Claymere, there lived a baron whose name was Andrew Hale. Baron Hale wasn't particularly remarkable and lived the ordinary life of a normal baron of his time. However, about his death there was a peculiar circumstance. Therein is my story.

A few weeks after the celebration of his forty-fifth birthday, Baron Hale awoke earlier than was his wont. Feeling particularly vigorous, he decided to enjoy an early morning stroll. He meandered across his pasturage toward Clear Creek, climbed over his fence, and entered the Village Lane several furlongs beyond his gate where the lane crossed the creek at a cove of willows. Lingered on the wooden bridge over Clear Creek, breathing good clean morning air, and watching the minnows play in the shallows, one thought naturally led to another and before he knew it the baron was thinking of breakfast. He turned toward his manor and, with the rising sun in his eyes, beheld upon the lane emerging from the glare a most unusual apparition. The baron could not see the figure clearly at first, because of the sun's glare, but it appeared to be a tall man stalking toward him.

The baron stepped to the side of the bridge to allow the stranger to pass. As the stranger stepped upon the bridge, the baron observed him more clearly, and was afraid. The figure was tall and lean, cloaked in a long robe that covered him completely. Even the stranger's hands were hidden within the voluminous sleeves. His head was covered by a hood. The stranger walked with absolute silence, neither causing the sound of footfalls upon the wooden bridge nor leaving tracks behind him in the dust. The figure's face was utterly invisible within the shadow of the hood. In his hand, he carried a long, ancient and battered scythe.

The baron knew the figure by instinct only, but instinct was enough. It was clear to the baron in an instant that the figure was Death, Who appeared only to those with whom He had business on that very day. The baron felt faint. His heart pounded and he couldn't catch his breath. The baron grasped the railing of the bridge but could not support himself. He slowly sank down until he squatted. Death made no comment but, just as It stepped past the baron, in the instant when It glanced at him, there was within Its walk a hesitation as of surprise or perhaps of momentary confusion. After a glance, Death continued on Its way and left the terrified baron kneeling upon the bridge, weeping between despair, disbelief, and hope.

At last, the baron regained enough strength to stumble toward his manor. By the time that he arrived, he was running. He had determined to escape. Death had been walking toward the castle, so the baron determined to go east, away from Claymere and toward the Kingdom of Willowvale. He ran into the Manor House and gathered into a bag all of the gold in his possession, mounted his fastest horse, and whipped it up the Kings' Road, toward the hills. The sun was barely 40 minutes high when Baron Hale began his ride and mercilessly drove his horse toward Willowvale.

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By noon, the horse was near exhaustion, covered with lather, and stumbling. The baron was forced to walk the last furlong to the holding of Harvey Trapper, which was the final dwelling before the ascent to Pine Summit. That holding, in addition to being the home of Harvey Trapper, also served as Inn and Livery for travelers. There, the baron bought another horse and whipped it up the hill.

The baron's second horse died short of the summit and, again, the baron walked the remaining distance. At Summit Freehold, he bought yet another horse and, without further delay, began the descent toward the Kingdom of Willowvale, which lay in the valley beyond the hills. The baron was quite tired by that time and lacked the strength to drive the beast as mercilessly as he had driven the two before it. Besides that, the way was mostly downhill. Thus, it happened that the horse, although near exhaustion, was still far from death when the baron rode into Willowvale Village that evening. Intending to request sanctuary in the local Chapel of the Holy Church, he asked directions and turned off of the Kings' Road and into a local byway. As he rounded the corner, there stood Death.

The baron lacked the strength to flee. In despair, he grasped his bag of gold and tried to speak. He couldn't make any sound at all. Death, however, could. The sepulchral chuckle that emanated from the hood chilled the baron with the breath of doom.

The baron opened his mouth, but could not speak. He could scarcely breathe. As Death gazed upward toward him, the evening sun shown past the baron's shoulder, and into the hood. At last, the baron saw the face of Death. He closed his eyes and they did not open again upon this Earth.

"I know," came the deep and cavernous voice of Death, "what it is that you wish to ask."

The baron no longer had the strength to grip his bag of gold. It dropped from his fingers, slid down the horse's shoulder, and jingled to the ground.

"You wonder to see me here," continued Death. "I confess to a certain puzzlement when, this very morning, I beheld you within the Kingdom of Claymere, joyful and in good health. Two aspects of that meeting did puzzle me."

The baron began to lose his place upon the horse. It felt slick, and he began to slide. He leaned forward, and clung to the horse's neck, but his arms were weak.

"First," said Death. "I knew that on this day you were to die of a failed heart, yet I saw within you this morning no indication of such failure. Your exertion this day, and your present fear, have accomplished that. Now, your heart is failing."

The baron slid to the ground. He could not stand, and fell into a kneeling position before Death. He raised his arms, as if in prayer.

"The other problem," said Death with another chuckle, "was one of location. Although I had an appointment with Queen Genevieve this morning in Claymere, I knew that my appointment with you was in Willowvale, this very evening. For me, distance isn't an obstacle, but I didn't see how a mere human could travel so far in

the few hours remaining before the appointment. Yet, here you are, at the proper time and place, and with a failing heart, exactly as was written.”

The crowd curious people that gathered saw only a terrified and exhausted man slide from his horse, raise his arms before him as if in prayer but with a grimace of death upon his face, and fall forward into the dust. Before the priest could be summoned, the baron was dead.

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The Fable of King Richard's Horse

This story was first completed on Wednesday, July 27, 1994 and was most recently revised on Tuesday, February 23, 2010.

Once upon a time, long long ago, in the Kingdom of Claymere, King Richard condemned a criminal to death. When the king condemned him, the criminal begged for an extra year of life. He promised that he would use the extra year to teach the king's favorite horse to sing.

King Richard, who eventually came to be known as Genevieve's King, denied the request. However, Queen Genevieve quietly pointed out to her husband some things that hadn't occurred to him. First, she suggested, it would cost very little to grant the request. Although it probably wasn't possible for a horse to sing, she remarked, the cost would be minimal. It wouldn't amount to much more than a meager bit of upkeep for the criminal and a guard or two for a year. Times were good at that time, and food was plentiful. Also, Claymere was a peaceful kingdom of law abiding folk. King Richard had lots of idle guards. And what, asked Queen Genevieve, if he could show the neighboring kings a singing horse? After considering her sage comments, King Richard agreed to the criminal's request. He even promised that, if the criminal should succeed in his unusual project, then he would grant the criminal a full pardon. Such was the generosity of King Richard when he was influenced by his wife, the Good Queen Genevieve.

The next morning, the criminal was escorted under guard to the Royal stables. There, he sang to the king's favorite horse. As the criminal stood singing a heartfelt aria, he attracted the attention of Robert, a stable boy who was working nearby. Robert was always eager for a chance to drop his shovel so he took the opportunity for a break and approached the criminal as closely as the guard would allow. There, he listened to the remainder of the aria, and then to a ballad, and then to a joyfully performed magnificent.

When Robert could control his curiosity no longer, he asked, "Hey, whyfore does he sing to the horse?"

"This criminal," explained the guard, "has been granted an extra year of life in return for his promise to teach the king's favorite horse to sing."

"Is he convicted of being crazy?" exclaimed Robert. "Don't he know that nay horses can sing?"

"Ask him," said the guard, shrugging and turning away.

"Be ye crazy?" asked Robert. "Everybody knows that nay horses can sing!"

"Well," replied the criminal, turning from the horse to Robert, "Mayhap ye be correct. I can tell by the smell about ye that it be yer field and not mine. Naytheless, I got myself another year of life in the deal."

"But singin' ta a horse?" asked Robert.

"Ken ye," suggested the criminal. "Singing ta a horse be not such a bad life, when the other choice be the Royal Executioner. Further yet, much may happen in a

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year. In a year, I might die anyway, having lived my rightful span. In a year, the king might die, and the Prince might have greater mercy.”

“Not likely!” commented Robert.

“Naytheless,” continued the criminal. “a year be long. In a year, much can happen. There could be war, flood, famine, or many another thing to distract a king from thoughts of a lowly criminal. Mayhap he then might forget me, or such events might create a greater need for guards, giving me a greater hope of escape. Mayhap in a year the good queen might prevail upon him to let me live.

Robert stood pondering these things.

“And who knows?” concluded the criminal, turning with a shrug back to the horse. “A year is long. In a year, the damned horse might even learn to sing.”