

## Moonlight on the Gallows

by Scott Cimarusti

The oblivious moon peers blindly down at her as she weeps a silver rain alone in the shadow of the gallows, a soul's worth of tears trickling down her cheeks.

Beneath her wringing hands, the soulless coffin wood thrums with the echoes of a thousand desperate pleas of the condemned and the entreaties of the bereft.

Even the wind still whispers of the impotent prayers uttered here, chilling her ears and her hollowed-out heart.

If this structure of wood and sorrow were ever to be dismantled, the vacant ground would remain forever blighted by a seemingly endless river of tears and a cacophony of lamentations.

For it is despair that reigns here, and reigns alone; immune to the machinations and whims of mortal men dispensing their impotent justice. And immune even to time, the only true healer of body and spirit—which is forever merely a bystander here.

The young woman wipes away her tears with the heels of her hands in a quick gesture of defiance, as if she can will away the grief that has a stranglehold on her heart.

At midday tomorrow, her beloved will walk the thirteen steps to the platform where a noose awaits his neck—the neck she has kissed lovingly more times than she could ever count. And with a pull of a lever by the executioner's hand, he will be taken from her forever.

Though not if she has her way.

She reaches into the folds of her cloak to retrieve the cloth pouch that the crone gave to her not an hour ago in exchange for the strange coin of silver that she had found in the box buried in her mother's vegetable garden.

The coin with the familiar letters forming strange words in a tongue similar to hers, but still very different:

LIBERTY and IN GOD WE TRUST on one side of the coin.

And UNITED STATES OF AMERICA on the other side with HALF DOLLAR.

On the LIBERTY side, there was the profile of a neatly groomed man with what she regards as purpose in his lifeless silver gaze. On the other side of the coin, a majestic bird of some kind—similar to the hawks that prey upon her messenger pigeons. The bird was partially covered by what looked like a shield and in one talon grasped a leafy branch. In the other talon, a cluster of arrows.

Like those wielded by the fabled Archers of Laummoren in an age long past.

The crone had cackled with delight upon laying her rheumy eyes upon the silver coin that the young woman had offered as payment for the promised contents of the cloth pouch, which she now clasps in a trembling hand as the bone-white moon rises higher in the ebony sky.

The hag had abruptly withdrawn the cloth pouch just as the young woman had reached for it, one milky cataract-shrouded eye regarding the young woman's eagerness with malicious glee.

"Ye must wait until the full moon is at its peak," the old woman croaked, her toothless mouth curled into a mirthless grin. "Before ye sprinkle the contents of the pouch 'neath the gallows... Otherwise the spell won't work."

The young woman had nodded in acknowledgement that she had understood the crone's instructions. Then she snatched the cloth pouch from the old woman's skeletal fingers and dashed out into the night, relieved to be beyond the hag's probing eyes.

Little did she know...

And now the young woman stands before the gallows that is to be her beloved's reckoning, pouch in hand, and the skull-faced moon almost directly overhead.

The young woman creeps under the gallows into the impenetrable blackness there. She thinks she hears whispered pleas and curses in this hallowed and haunted place.

The minutes drag on, and the young woman grows increasingly impatient waiting for the stubborn moon to ascend to its zenith. She's worried that her da' will find her bed empty during one of his nightly pacings when his rheumatism keeps him awake.

She peers out from under the gallows up at the leering moon, the minutes slipping through her fingers like dry garden soil.

Old Man Moon must be close enough to its peak, she reasons, trying to convince herself that the crazy old hag's directions were only the ravings of an addled mind. Magic was magic, wasn't it?

Besides, she doesn't know how much longer she can listen to phantom lamentations echoing inside her head.

She loosens the drawstring of the cloth pouch and after recoiling from the rank odor within, sprinkles the ashen colored powder directly beneath the trapdoor of the gallows. Then she pockets the empty pouch and scurries out from under the gallows—grateful to be rid of the entreating voices echoing inside her head.

And she heads for home beneath the ever-watchful gaze of the indifferent moon.

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The moon is nowhere to be seen when the young woman finds herself standing before the gallows again at midday. A throng of villagers surrounds her.

Against the cornflower blue sky, two figures stand atop the gallows platform—one is the village magistrate, a balding and mustachioed man brimming with self-importance, the other a taller and more imposing figure hooded in black.

The hangman.

The young woman shades her eyes with her hand from the merciless sun overhead as she follows the progress of a horse-driven wagon approaching. The wagon is too far still for her to see its passengers, but she already knows who's aboard.

It is her beloved.

Wrongly convicted, she believes, of assaulting the mayor's son to preserve her honor from the mayor's son's groping and insistent hands.

In a just world, such an infraction would not carry with it the penalty of death at the end of a hangman's noose. But in a small village on the outskirts of nowhere in a lawless and chaotic world fallen from grace, such injustices are woefully commonplace.

Which is why she resorted to calling upon the crazy old crone to restore her version of justice and save her beloved from an unjust and premature death.

The wagon is closer now, and she can see her beloved, his hands bound, and he is flanked on either side by the mayor's sheriff and a deputy. His straw-colored hair is a glowing halo in the midday summer sun.

A morbid chorus of both cheers and booing erupts from the macabre crowd gathered around the gallows to witness the severing of a young man's life.

The young woman endures the cacophony with her head held high, the barest hint of a knowing smile curling the corners of her lips.

Before she realizes it, the wagon has stopped within a few feet of the gallows, and with the unceremonious assistance of the mayor's sheriff and his deputy, her beloved is escorted down from the wagon and up the thirteen steps to his impending demise, his hands still bound behind him.

The blowhard magistrate makes his customary speech, his words lost to the young woman's ears—for her attention is solely upon her beloved as their gazes lock.

She offers him a reassuring smile.

Then a silken black hood eclipses her beloved's face, and the hangman loops his noose around the young man's neck.

The impatient crowd utters a collective gasp, punctuated by a few eager cheers.

The magistrate then utters his official condemnation and nods toward the hangman.

The young woman's heart is a trapped bird fluttering in her chest. She resists the urge to cover her eyes.

The hangman pauses as if for dramatic effect to tease the bloodthirsty crowd.

Then he pulls the lever, triggering the trapdoor beneath her beloved.

And with a dull thud, the trapdoor plummets downward.

The crowd is silent. Dozens of pairs of eyes widen in disbelief, their jaws slack. The young woman covers her incredulous smile with her hands.

The young man has not dropped through the trap door's opening as expected with a whip-crack of his neck snapping.

He is instead standing in exactly the same place, his feet hovering in the air where the trap door had been only seconds ago before it dropped.

An awed hush lingers in the air as the magistrate and the hangman regard each other accusingly, as if expecting the other to know what to do about this bizarre situation.

The young woman is scanning the crowd expectantly. She is counting on the collective uncertainty to provide her with a window of opportunity to rescue her beloved. She can see they are all still spellbound by the unbelievable sight of her beloved somehow standing upon empty air, the slack noose still around his neck, his hooded head turning back and forth as he presumably wonders what is happening—wondering why he still draws breath in this world.

The young woman withdraws the long thin-bladed knife from her belt, mustering up the courage to ascend the gallows and cut the rope around her beloved's neck.

And, if necessary, plunge the knife into the belly of anyone who tries to stop her.

She has taken her first step, tightening her grip around the knife's handle when a voice cries out.

“By the gods!”

The young woman raises her eyes to find her beloved has begun to convulse violently, his legs kicking wide arcs over empty air.

Cutting through the incredulous silence, she can hear her beloved’s choked gasps for air—though the noose still hangs slack upon his right shoulder.

The young woman’s feet are frozen in place as she struggles to comprehend what is happening—how he can be strangling at the end of a slack noose.

Then out of the corner of her eye, she spots the withered old crone glancing at her sideways from among the crowd of of helpless onlookers.

“I told ye,” the hag chortles above the sound of the young man’s strangled gasps. “I told ye to wait until the moon was at its peak!”

Then the old woman begins to cackle wildly as the young man’s flailing kicks become more feeble as his life slips away.

Instead of a quick death by a broken neck, her beloved is slowly and agonizingly strangled as he hangs over open air at the end of a slack noose.

All because the young woman had been too impatient to follow the old woman’s specific instructions regarding the contents of the cloth pouch.

The crone’s raspy cackling is filling the young woman’s ears now, and she can feel herself slipping toward the black yawning chasm of madness.

She still holds the long-bladed knife in her hand, and she knows now what to with it.

Her eyes never leaving the face of the withered old crone, still cackling with malicious relish, the young woman turns the blade around in her hands toward her own belly.