

HAM IN THE FOREST

By C.S. Malerich

Mirror Lake lay at the edge of a forest that grew so green and golden and tame it was sometimes called the Sun's Forest, but according to the law of the land it belonged to the King and not the sun at all. The lake was deep and still, as its name suggests, elliptical, and fed by an underground spring that made the water fresh and clear. On one of its long sides rose sharp cliffs in gray pillars of stone, forming a high ridge from where the Tangle Wood began. One column of these cliffs curved out into the water and this was called Chimney Rock because it resembled such. On the other side of the lake a river found its source and farther downstream where the water ran deeper and faster, a bridge crossed. This bridge was part of a road that coursed through the tame forest between Highkeep and the King's castle, Sherrinstone.

One day the King decided that he and his son would ride to visit his vassal Percival at Highkeep, with whom he was very good friends and neighbors. He sent one of his servants on to announce him so that the worthy gentleman might have his house in order. The servant was a youth called Ham, which no one thought was a funny name at this period in history.

The trip to Highkeep was uneventful. The lord received the news that the King and the Prince were coming, and told Ham to tell them that he most anxiously awaited their arrival. With this message, he also gave Ham a golden signet ring, worth probably more than all the horses at Highkeep, to give to the King. This the lad most delicately wrapped in a silk napkin and carried gingerly in his hand as he took to the road again.

It looked as though the journey back to his master would be as the journey forth, and the sun being bright and the sky being blue, he began to whistle. He abruptly stopped, however, when he perceived the sound of rough voices somewhere in the brush to his left. Picking through the forest carefully, he left the road to see from where the sounds issued. Down a dell and beyond a large cluster of trees, he spied at last the source. A group of crude men, unshaven and unwashed, sat around a campfire, apparently taking their midday meal. Horses were tethered nearby, bearing full saddlebags. As Ham watched, one of the men took the saddlebags from the steeds, all six over his shoulders, and hunkered down to dole out the contents. While he counted out gold and silver coins from the luggage, the other men had the following conversation.

“You should have stabbed him from behind, before he had the chance to scream,” grunted one.

“Aww, but I love to see the look on their faces when they see what’s coming,” replied a second, fingering a long knife fondly. The third man beside him laughed cruelly and slapped his back.

“Well, I don’t care where and when you stab them, but you could have made a neater job of it. Blood all over his hat, and it was a nice hat, too,” put in a fourth.

“Be sure you’re reckoning those galleons right, Billy,” yelled the first to the one with the saddlebags. “Have a care none end up in your pockets afore they’ve been counted.” He seemed to be the fastidious member of the group. A sixth and silent member sat beneath the shadow of a great tree, picking specks of dried blood from beneath his fingernails with the point of a double-edged dagger.

“Damn nice hat,” the fourth said. “I could have worn that hat.”

Holding his breath, Ham tiptoed quietly back to the road. Then he ran as fast as he could toward Sherrinstone.

He was breathing hard by the time he reached the bridge over the river, but without slowing his step, he raced onward. Then, horror of horrors, his foot caught on a loose plank. Down he went, and as his arms pitched forward to catch himself, the ring fell from its napkin and rolled, with a glimmer, into the river. Ham jumped to his feet and pressed himself against the railing. With a whimper he looked down at the rushing water. The sudden clip-clop of hooves upon the wooden bridge made him jump. He looked up to see the King and the Prince on their white chargers.

“Hoah, there,” said the King, halting. The Prince did likewise. “Well met, Ham, m’boy. You look out of breath. How has Lord Percival received you?”

“Oh, very well, sire,” replied Ham, keeping his eyes to the bridge. “He bids you come at will; he looks forward to your arrival.”

“Was this message all? Was there no gift or tribute he sends ahead without you?”

“Er—there was, sire, a ring—”

“A ring? Well, let us see the thing!”

“Alas, sire, I was bringing it to you, but upon my way I—I met a group of bandits on the road...and...I have not the ring any longer,” replied Ham, giving the abbreviated truth of the matter.

“Bandits? In my forest? This will never do! I will return to Sherrinstone at once for my guard. We will sniff out these rascals—but we are now closer to Highkeep.

Son!” he abruptly looked to the Prince, who sat up at attention to hear his father’s

command. "You ride ahead with Ham and tell Percival what has happened. Cover your raiment with your cloak. Let not the thieves see who you are."

The Prince nodded. The King wheeled his steed about and set off at a gallop. The Prince, who was a boy not much older than his servant, looked at the red-faced Ham.

"Come, ride behind me awhile, so you might catch your breath. We are not far now."

Ham vaguely nodded his assent and allowed the Prince to pull him up to the saddle.

So the Prince and the servant set off, mounted upon the same steed. They had not gone far along the road when a figure dropped from the trees into their path.

"Who goes there?" asked the man who stood before them, a tall figure dressed in Lincoln green and armed with a stout oaken staff, a bow slung over his shoulder and a full quiver of arrows. Unlike the strangers Ham had happened on before, however, his beard was neatly trimmed and he did not need a bath.

The Prince looked to Ham uncertainly. "He isn't one of the bandits," said Ham quietly to his Prince. "He must be one of Percival's people."

At which point the stranger said, "I am a yeoman of Lord Percival of Highkeep and beg to know who travels toward his door."

"My name is Henry," said the Prince, dismounting and heading towards the yeoman with a friendly hand extended. Ham slid off behind him. "Actually, it's Prince Henry," he went on, brushing aside his cloak. "You've probably heard of my father...? And this is his servant Ham."

The man bowed. "I have heard of your father, young master. He is a worthy man, as are you, no doubt." Instead of taking the Prince's hand, however, the yeoman began to circle the two youths, thoughtfully stroking his chin. "Hmm...I wonder though, sir, about your attendant here. Has his loyalty to yourself and your father ever been tested? We have a tale told in these woods about a most unworthy servant. He was bringing his lord tribute when he tripped and lost the bounty in the river, and instead of owning his clumsiness to his master, lied and said that thieves had stolen it."

At this, Ham cringed, but the Prince, who was not at all quick-minded, merely replied that he had never heard such a story.

"Hmm," said the yeoman with a ponderous look at Ham. "Well, I have a proposal for you, young sire. Allow me to put a test to your servant here before I grant you permission to pass. Let us test the mettle of he who would ride astride behind a prince."

The stranger beckoned them to follow him off the road which here, at their left, ran directly alongside the short end of Mirror Lake. The Prince led his steed gamely. Ham had little choice but to follow.

"Now..." said the stranger, and without warning he seized Ham by the arms and tossed him into the shallows. On the slippery rocks Ham could not hold his footing and fell completely into the water. The stranger laughed merrily, and the Prince joined him, from sheer surprise. Ham, overcome now not with embarrassment but anger, managed to gain his feet, and stood, drenched, blowing out his cheeks like a mad bluebird. The yeoman allowed himself another peal of laughter, then made this proposal: "Come, Master Ham, I will race you to the rock yonder, if you have not had enough of water already. The first there and to the top wins."

"Very well," replied Ham boldly, looking at Chimney Rock, one hundred or more yards out. Neither the distance nor the stranger's apparent strength bothered him. He thought only of beating the insolent knave.

The stranger nodded and removed his green jerkin and boots. Ham waded to the edge of the water and pulled off his own already soggy boots.

"You will start us off, will you not, Your Highness?" the stranger asked of the Prince, when both challengers had stripped down to naught but their tunics. A moment later, the Prince waved his hand and shouted, "Go!" and both the stranger and Ham shot into the cold, clear water, turning the still surface in their wake from mirror to froth.

They were soon out far beyond where either could stand. To their right, the smooth stone cliffs rose only a yard or three away, but there no shallows on that side, only the occasional jutting rock to knock foot or arm against. Ham dug furiously into the water with each stroke of his arms, matching two of his own strokes to one of the stranger's, but try as he might, the stranger was slowly outdistancing him. Beginning to feel he had been rash to accept the challenge, Ham cast a quick glance over his shoulder, back to the Prince sitting upon the narrow beach. No closer to shore than to Chimney Rock, the only choice seemed to be to continue. Ham kicked his tiring legs and swam forward.

The stranger seemed to weary as well. He stopped every few strokes, treading water. At these times Ham was able to catch up with him, but then he would be off again, propelled by renewed strength like a rock from a sling.

At the last the stranger landed at the rock and began to climb with his bare feet on the slick stone. Ham was just behind him, groping his way up. High above the surface of

the water on the wide flat top of the column, the swimmers came to rest like turtles sunning themselves in the warm afternoon, flat on their stomachs, dripping and fatigued.

"Well done, my friend," the yeoman said in gasping congratulations. "I half expected you to turn back to shore."

"I nearly did," replied Ham, also gasping.

"There's an honest fellow," said the yeoman, "and for your reward, the view!" With that, the stranger got to his feet and made a sweeping gesture of the space around them. From atop Chimney rock, the whole of the lake, the shore, the road, and, far in the distance, the fortress at Highkeep on its hill were visible. Ham staggered up to see it properly, but his thrill was cut short when he saw what was approaching through the forest from the south.

"The bandits!" he cried, pointing away. "I spied them this morn. They will surely come upon the Prince if they take to the road!"

"Hold," said the stranger, pointing toward Sherrinstone. "The King rides with his guard. Those bandits will not escape."

Ham quickly gauged the distance between the oncoming groups of horsemen and decided they were not close enough. "The Prince's throat may be slit before his father arrives. Remember, his raiment is uncovered! We must somehow alert him." Desperately, Ham looked about for some means of a signal. His eyes hit on a thicket of dead brush at the edge of the Tangle Wood. "Perhaps we might make a fire..." he muttered, dragging away a few of the larger branches. "Have you any flint?"

"Think you I go swimming with a tinderbox in my pocket?" rasped the stranger.

"No," replied Ham, his eyes widening. "But I do know where those thieves hide their loot. Look here!"

Beneath the pile of dead wood, Ham had uncovered several wooden chests and gunnysacks. There was little time to bother about the treasure, however. Remembering the crisis at hand, Ham pulled the white shirt from his back and picked up a long branch, fashioning a kind of pennant. He rushed to the edge of the rock and began waving it and yelling for all he was worth. The bandits, at this point to the edge of the lake directly across from them, raised their heads and began yelling as well. Instead of riding onto the road toward Highkeep, they dismounted and made for the water, where two wooden boats were tethered. Into these they piled and began to row for the rock.

"Well, you've gained their attention," said the yeoman. Ham scuttled back from the rock ledge and dropped his signal, suddenly realizing the danger had been diverted to himself and the stranger. No means of escape presented itself, with the water and the ruffians before and below and the thick forest at their backs. Ham and the yeoman peered over the ledge and saw that one of the boats had already reached them across the short width of the lake, and now its occupants were climbing towards them up the column of rock. The other boat was not far behind.

"The booty!" cried the yeoman at once. Between the two of them, they were able to lift the largest chest and drop it over the edge of the rock. It hit one of their foes square in the chest, and down he fell into the water, but the others were still advancing. Ham picked up a sack, heavy with the weight of coins, and hurled it with all his might. Unfortunately, it missed. Another that the yeoman tossed nearly met its mark, but the thief was able to catch the sack of plunder and continued to climb upward. Another from

the second boat jumped from the vessel to the rock. The first bandit, his knife glittering in his teeth, was nearly upon them.

"Come, we must jump!" cried the yeoman, casting out his hand to the boy, and together they took a flying leap off the top of Chimney Rock. Ham smiled crazily as he felt, for a thrilling instant, nothing but sky and space above and below. *Flying*. He closed his eyes and opened them again as he plunged into the cold water like a cannonball. A spray of bubbles closed above him, and he struck for the surface where he filled his lungs once more. The water was surging and swelling around them like the ocean.

"The boat!" yelled the yeoman, and Ham needed no further encouragement. He grabbed hold the wooden hull and pulled himself inside. Alas, this was the second boat, still containing two of the incensed thieves. The yeoman had climbed in from the other side and was now grappling with one. The other no sooner perceived Ham than he had one oar in his hands and was taking a mighty swing. Ham ducked in the nick of time. Meanwhile, the stout stranger threw his foe overboard and managed to club the one threatening Ham with the other oar.

"Come, row for your Prince!" ordered the yeoman, thrusting the oar into the lad's hands. Ham obeyed, digging into the water fiercely. Across the water he could see the Prince, no longer placidly watching the shallows, but on his feet and urging them onward. A glance behind, however, told Ham that the remaining three bandits had once again taken to their boat in pursuit.

The cries and the commotion had reached the ears of the King and his guard, and they had hastened their march. The boat bearing our Ham and the stranger reached the

shore with no help in sight save the Prince and his steed, but as the bandits were nearly upon them, so appeared the King's guard, who seized upon the ruffians without delay. The bandits struggled admirably, but the odds were not in their favor. They were subdued.

The King dismounted, and all became silent as he surveyed the company, finally choosing to ask the stranger for an explanation. With no minced words, the yeoman related the challenge he had made to Ham. The King turned a hard eye on his servant.

"You would leave my son, your young master, to wait for you alone upon the shore while you sported with a stranger? When you knew dangerous men lurked?"

Ham said nothing but stared, shame-faced at the ground.

"Please, Your Majesty," the yeoman interjected. "I pressed him to it, and truly, if I may say so, I have never seen a more faithful servant. He would give his own life than see your son harmed. No sooner did he understand the danger to the Prince than he put forth such a show as to distract these scoundrels from their course, and turn the threat from his young master to himself. It was he that saved your son from these cutpurses."

The King looked with new eyes on Ham after that speech, and Ham ventured a glance at his master's face, but he said nothing to him. Rather, the King turned to the apprehended thieves. "Aah, yes, these highwaymen...the very same who deprived me of my tribute. Perhaps we might recover it from them now, eh?"

"Your Majesty," the yeoman ventured to speak once more, "I do believe most of what these thieves may have garnered today lies beneath the water."

"Oh," said the King, disappointed. "'Tis a pity. But they will pay dearly for it."

"Uh-hem, sire," Ham cleared his throat, troubled as to what his conscience bid him do now, having only just regained his master's favor. Nevertheless, he went on. "These men, whatever else their crimes, did not steal the ring Lord Percival sent to you. I lost it. In running from them, I tripped on the bridge and lost the ring to the river."

At this revelation, all eyes turned to the King, except Ham's, whose remained fixed on the mud. The Prince held his breath. Finally the King smiled.

"This much I will forgive you, in consideration of your loyalty and concern for my son, who is greater treasure to me than any golden ring. You shall not be punished. Perhaps a promotion is in order instead..."

The matter settled, most everyone relaxed, and the King signaled the company to leave the shoreline for the road. As the guard and the royals went ahead on their horses, Ham hung back a moment with the yeoman.

"Well, Master Ham, you have passed your test beyond all expectation. You have my esteem."

"Please, sir, won't you tell me your name? I wonder who you really are, who knew what happened to the ring, even before I had the courage to admit it."

The yeoman smiled. "My name is of little importance. I am merely a faithful servant, as you are."

"Maybe, but I think perhaps you do not serve Lord Percival as you claim, but something or someone else, someone extra-ordinary."

"No, Percival is my liege, as I said," the yeoman came to the far edge of the road and paused. "I am ordinary as you are. But," he added with a tap of his nose, "simply

because *I* am ordinary does not mean I never hold converse with things extra-ordinary."

And with that, the goodly yeoman disappeared into the greenwood.