

Short Story 62: Straw

The Urth list — 2 messages, 1 voices, 01 May 2014

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Marc Aramini — 01 May 2014, 18:44

"Straw" first appeared in *Galaxy* (the table of contents of Storeys from the Old Hotel says in 1974, but other evidence indicates it was the January 1975 edition of the magazine).

SUMMARY:

The narrator Jerr, thinks back on when he was 17 years old and killed his first man — he had joined a group of five air balloon freelancers who ran into lean times and were almost out of straw and food. The day he speaks of he saw a flock of geese fly underneath in the form of a pike head, and this proved an omen of approaching battle. He had joined the troupe after knocking down one of the members Derek, who insulted his family goose, and left a life behind the plow.

They ran out of straw after some tension between the strong and large female Barcata and the man who pilots the balloon, Clow. After a slight crash, they were greeted by the Baron Ascolot and his men, and after confirming that they are "floating swords" for hire, Ascolot's son insulted the narrator, saying "If that boy is high-hearted, or a fierce fighter, either, I'll eat his breeks." Jerr deployed the pincer of his spring loaded mace and pulled the man from his horse.

The captain Miles apologized, but Ascolot said his son must learn humility and invited them back to his villa, claiming there was no straw. He provided them a feast at which his daughters distracted Derek and Barcata, and in the night Jerr found stables full of straw. When he told his captain, the captain merely showed him black smoke in the distance and said, "That's why there's no straw here. Gold but no straw, because a soldier gets straw only where he isn't welcome. They'll reach the river there by sundown, and I'm told it can be forded at this season." The invaders, the fire-wights who burn straw, come at moonrise.

COMMENTARY AND ARTHURIAN REFERENCE:

There is a gimmick in the background of the story that most Wolfe stories don't have: what if simple, possible inventions could have happened ages before their actual conception in the world? How would they be applied? In this case, the value of straw becomes something like the value of petroleum based fuel — a commodity that allows a strong bargaining posture. This seems like a realistic SF story situated in a historical setting rather than an alternate history, but it should probably be categorized as such.

The name Ascolot is intimately related to the Arthurian myths of Lancelot and Gawain. More importantly, it gives us a relative context for the war. Lancelot stayed at Ascolot and the daughter of the household, the Maid of Ascolot fell in love with him and later flirted with Gawain. This also clues us in to a possible time for the action: a fifth century battle between the Britons led by King Arthur and the invading Saxons.

Wolfe's statements about his motivation specifically mention the date the myth of Arthur is

historically ensconced, as well:

'Straw' is fundamentally a hot-air ballooning story. Every so often I like to think of things that could have been invented a long time before they actually were - or that might easily have been invented but weren't. For example, for hundreds of years, wars among the Greeks (possibly the most brilliantly creative people in history) were fought by heavy infantrymen armed with long spears and circular shields. Most of them were won by the Spartans, the acknowledged masters of hoplite warfare. Then, around 379 BC, Thebes produced a general of real genius named Epaminondas. And Epaminondas came up with the simplest *great* military innovation I know of: he cut a notch out of each round shield. That was all it was. Instead of looking like a whole cracker, the shield looked like a cracker from which a tiny bite had been taken. But that bite permitted the soldier to use his left hand to assist his right in managing his long spear, and the Thebans crushed the Spartans at Leuctra.

"The point is that Epaminondas' notch could have been cut a thousand years sooner -- in Homer's day, for example. In the same way, it seems obvious that the hot-air balloon could have been invented well before the end of the ancient world. You need a little rope (it's been around for a long time), a lot of silk (which by then was coming steadily along the spice routes), some straw, and an iron basket to burn it in. There are no moving parts, and the design is simplicity itself -- a bag held over a fire. But if the hot-air balloon had been invented in 500 AD, what would have been done with it?

Given this date and the Arthurian reference, I was looking for one that would explain the name Clow, as a few of the statements around his character are cryptic. Unless it was a shortening of Claudin, son of the Frankish villain Claudus, and one of the 12 knights who eventually finds the holy grail, I could find none.

The wolfe-wiki mentions the meaning of the names for the characters: Miles means Soldier in Latin, Barcata implies trousered, and Derek Germanic for leader. Certainly Barcata is a woman who wears pants.

There is also the sign that either the roads or great houses have been completely destroyed by the fire-wights (firemen): "it was a big house, all built of white brick with gardens and outbuildings, and a road that ran up to the door. There are none like that now, I suppose." It is also hinted that riding in a balloon was once common and is now rare, possible because the fire-wights burn all the straw they get their hands on.

THE INVENTIONS:

Spring loaded pikes with heads that launch which are charged by pounding them against the ground to compress the spring, hot air balloons, a spring loaded mace with a pincer/plier grip, and mitts with retractable claws — all simple innovations which make the combat sound a bit exotic.

WOMEN IN WOLFE

As I think back on the female characters we have been exposed to this far in Wolfe's writing career, we have seen mysterious elderly secretive types with ambiguous motives (Aunt Jeanine, Mother Clout, even Aunt Olivia [who in my opinion is one of his finest female characters]), maybe one or two needy love interests or pity inducing characters, some of them prostitutes (here I am thinking of "It's Very Clean," "Going to the Beach," or even "Sonya, Crane Wessleman, and Kittee"), traitorous ones ("Hour of Trust") but this is the first time we have a big strong potentially lesbian character which will be repeated in General Saba (who is more

bovine). Gunny in *Urth of the New Sun* perhaps escapes the lesbian connotations but proves traitorous in the final analysis. There is definitely an adversarial attitude between Clow and Barcata: he snidely comments that “nearly any woman will fight if she can get behind you”.

Jerr is then legitimately afraid that she will go for him, and thinks that it will take 3 of them together to get her out of the balloon — and that by then they would probably be dead. Barcata is a man hater to some degree, and the Wolfe-wiki doesn't seem to pick up on this: Jerr is lucky to eat anything sitting next to her, and Barcata's interest in the girl at the party, putting her arm around her to warn her of men, is a lesbian advance. Without the distraction of the girls, Derek and Barcata would have left nothing for Jerr to eat. So we finally have a girl who would physically be able to kill all of the men around her in Wolfe ...

While Barcata is a strong woman, she doesn't quite escape that particular stereotype of the physically powerful and resentful lesbian.

CLOW AND THE NARRATOR:

Yet there is also something a bit more subtle at work in the text, and the odd juxtaposition of the following: “She was afraid of Clow. I found out why later — Clow was the only one I was not frightened by, but that is another story, too.” Try as I might, I couldn't find much indication of the reason that Barcata would fear Clow and Jerr would fear everyone but Clow, unless, this, too, stemmed from sexuality.

After his bitter statement about women, Clow pulls out a throwing spike and “feigns” cleaning his nails. Later, he pulls out a bit of cherry wood and begins carving a woman out of it. There is little indication that Clow or Jerr have any interest in the Baron's daughters. There must be a reason that Jerr does not fear Clow and fears all the rest, but it is unclear that there is enough information in the story to make any but the vaguest guesses of an intimate relationship between Clow and Jerr that, if discovered, would make the rest worth being frightened of. (I tend to shun Borski's claims that Marsch noticing the state of Trenchard's penis in *V.R.T.* indicates anything of the sort, and there is admittedly almost no sexual imagery one way or the other in “Straw”, so it is not necessarily a textually based assertion).

If Clow is some kind of historical cognate of Claudin, the cast out son of a Frankish King who wants nothing to do with his father and instead joins a band of roving knights based on principles of purity and goodness, then perhaps it is his royal blood that she fears, but that is a tenuous, sketchy connection I am not willing to truly invest in, as there is little indication of Clow's background.

RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER WORK:

Taking a historical event, changing it slightly, and re-imagining it are present in Wolfe novels such as **The Devil in a Forest** and the

Soldier series,

but this is taking a highly romanticized event such as the myths surrounding the Anglo-Saxon wars near the 5th century AD, turning them realistic, and introducing possible inventions that would have changed the world, in this case, spring loaded and tool based weaponry and the hot air balloon. I suppose it may be categorized as alternate history, but it is a bit more subtle than the almost cliché “what if Germany had won WWII?”

I suppose I might as well talk about how this work is echoed in David Drake's homage in **Shadows of the New Sun**, “Bedding” with a brief look at that story. Instead of a coming conflict, it shows a balloon mercenary troupe leaving after a battle in which their crossbowman

is injured severely in the arm. There also seems to be five: The captain, the narrator Chris Bagnell (an Anglo-Saxon surname), the injured Siltsy, a strong but slow boy named Diccon, and a female named Birgitta. It also makes use of the statement in "Straw" that straw is plentiful when a balloon soldier is no longer welcome.

The purse the narrator of "Straw" toys with is reflected in the purse Chris Bagnell uses to provide for and pay off his local girlfriend. The Baron who hired them is very nervous about them leaving and has his own crossbows ready in case they don't.

Rather than the city of Ascolot, it is set in Gotham, which could be the traditional English setting or refer to the ruins of New York — for unlike Straw, this is actually a far future tale. The names of the characters would seem to be primarily European in nature, however. When the girl's ten year old brother tries to stop Chris from leaving, he has a pistol given to him by Chris, whose bullets are long dead, allowing Chris to survive and tie up the boy. So while Wolfe's story posits inventions before their time, Drake's looks at the return of halberds, horses, and balloons, and baronial life far after their time is gone. It turns out that the Captain and Chris went through exactly the same struggle in the past, with Chris vowing to track down the Captain (whose gun it was) and ultimately joining him, thus the theme of history repeating itself throughout Drake's story.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Is the name Clow short for anything? Are the fire-wights Saxon invaders or does this story take place a wee bit later? Is the purse Jerr indicates to his listener in the present tense the same purse as the captains, indicating that Jerr takes his place? Did the captain die in this struggle?

Marc Aramini — 01 May 2014, 19:26 · follows Marc Aramini

Also, very briefly, Gawain stayed at Ascolot - his symbol is the pentagle, the 5 pointed star, according to some myths. (His horse is Gringolet and Gawain is careful with his horse - Lancelot has no distinct horse and will ride them to death if necessary.)

The horse Jerr finds in the stable hiding the straw is "a big warhorse with a white star on his forehead."

[Gawain's shield is gold on a red background - as the balloon sinks, Jerr remarks "we were sinking towards what looked like a red and gold carpet"] Could be entirely coincidental but I thought I would mention it.