

Short Story 206*: The Hour of the Sheep

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Marc Aramini — 28 Apr 2015, 14:53

#THE HOUR OF THE SHEEP

"The Hour of the Sheep" first appeared in *Fast Forward 1* in 2007 and has never been collected.

##Summary

At the suggestion of the President-Protector, Tiero of Trin considers how to write a book on swordsmanship and self-defense, which he has decided to entitle *Swords for Peace*. Speaking into his vphone to dictate it, he considers that he is not a great talker, and that the resulting manuscript will be too wordy and diffuse, so he takes up a pen "and the little ivory-handled pen knife Mother had given him in the year before her death."

He vows to write his book by hand and then read it into the vprint, and thinks that, since the President-Protector suggested it, his manuscript will of course be published. "It would be published; and he - Tiero, now called the greatest swordsman alive - would look an arrant fool unless it were insightful and decently written."

He vows to write as well as he can and avoid fine turns of phrase, and thinks of his father's story of a temple in Attenis with a statue of the goddess:

"Her whole posture offered blessing and forgiveness to an erring humankind. The people loved her and wished to make her statue more beautiful still, so they covered her lovely body with a gown of purple silk and put polychrome beads around her neck. For a time her feet puzzled them, since they were one with the block of marble upon which she stood. At last they cut the soles from a pair of black leather pumps and cemented them to the feet of their image of the goddess. When they had added a brown hat with a long scarlet feather, they declared their work at an end. And every visitor to Attenis was shown their beautiful goddess.

He thinks how proud his father, a schoolmaster, would be to see his son at court, and remembers his father's advice: "First tell them what you're going to tell them Tiero. Then tell them. And when you've told them, tell them what you've told them. That is nine-tenths of teaching."

Tiero describes the five hours of the sword that must be mastered "to be safe in the streets and to make the streets safe for others."

The first is the Hour of the Sheep, that of relaxation when one is off guard, which must be left behind before leaving one's house.

The second is the Hour of the Lion, representing watchfulness, always looking for signs of danger but not fearing it.

The third is the Hour of the Tiger, or of heightened awareness, when danger has been identified and the situation must be assessed for advantages and disadvantages.

The fourth is the Hour of the Bull, ready for the attack as it starts, for "We are not sheep to stand empty-eyed, awaiting the blow."

The bull transitions to the last hour, that of the Wolf, in the heat of battle, "and wolflike slaying man after man. Behold the empty eyes of our foes, those who thought to surprise us, themselves surprised!"

He goes on to talk of a hypothetical foe and his tactics - considering if he is old or young, lame or hale, brave or cautious, and hearing what witnesses have to say of his style and predilections. "If we are to defend ourselves on the streets, still more if we are to render those streets safe for the defenseless, we must learn all we can about those who have made them dangerous."

He considers how his book will look on the shelf, and decides to dedicate it to the President-Protector, and continues his writing on learning of the weapons of one's enemies, concluding, "If our minds are our own best weapons - and they are, never doubt it - are not the minds of our foes their best weapons also? We may deride the foes we find in the streets as men of little education, but they too have learned."

At this point he considers people will ask him about his encounters in the street, "Yet there had been none." His lessons and the duels leading up to his proclamation as the greatest swordsman of all were held in a regulated, controlled environment. "And here he was, wielding the pen instead of the sword. Reciting, like any other student, his masters' secondhand opinions. It would not do."

He picks up his sword, seeing that its dial contained a full charge and playing with its "demon stone" to produce an energy blade "aglow with fell Tyrian energy" whose length he can control.

He dresses gaudily and goes out to look for trouble in the Questing Quarter, "that very quarter of the city he had scrupulously avoided all his life."

It is so called because people go there to gamble and to seek out mates and drink there. "Fifty years before, it had been popular and fashionable. It was worn, hard, and a trifle dirty now. When it was frequented by persons of quality, as it sometimes was still, they were generally men who hoped that poverty and perversion might season lives grown stale."

He enters a tavern eyeing everyone with hostility, but no trouble transpires. He walks the streets, and "once a drunken roisterer nearly vomited on his boots; he skipped quickly to one side and reflected that it was his closest approach to danger."

He enters a brothel and sits there, regarding the women until they are mostly gone, and then selecting none of them. One of the prostitutes calls a bouncer with a cudgel who proclaims, "I don't want no trouble with you." Tiero sees that the man is regarding his right hand, and uses his left to pull out his energy sword and incinerate the man's club [Tiero's subterfuge is here probably extraneous, given the different ranges of their weapons].

He walks outside in the dark as the moon rises, but does not find trouble. He enters a gambling den and makes two large bets, then displays his wealth to tempt robbers: "If this would not do

it, noting would. Nothing did, clearly."

After patrolling almost to the edge of the district, he turns around, and finally hears a woman scream as three men attempt to push her into a coach door. He runs to defend her, and the attackers wield burning swords - he severs one man's arm and then struggles with the second for a bit before felling him as well. The third gets away in the coach. The woman kisses him in gratitude, stuttering in her fright as he waves down a jitney to take them away from the Questing Quarter. She says the man is a suitor, and that she knew the cruel fate of his first wife, one that Tiero would not believe, claiming she killed herself.

Tiero says he understands why the man wants her, for she is the most beautiful woman in the world, and she in turn tells him how comely he is. She asks if he is married, and he responds, "Now you'll wonder whether I killed a wife, or drove one to suicide. I've never had one."

She recognizes his name and says she is Corlane Ryki Marella, Chatelaine-minor di Mirbellos. Tiero realizes her father is supposedly the Lord of Mirbellos, and she his unmarried eldest daughter.

She says she is his only daughter, continuing, "I'd never lie to you, Tiero. Not after what you did. Never! And now you are getting all respectful ... and I don't want that. Call me Ryki. It's what all my friends call me, I assure you, and if you're not a friend, who is?"

She says the man in the coach, whose name is Mercus, will go to her father's house and inquire if she is there, probably trying to bribe a servant named Aengius. She asks to go to Tiero's house instead.

Later, at ease from their recreation, Tiero whispers into his vprint to continue his book, claiming that while knives and cudgels are the usual weapons wielded by thugs, he has been forced to engage three men with swords.

"*That such situations are ever fraught with danger, I need hardly say.

When engagement cannot be avoided - as in my own case - the swordsman must above all know that he faces an additional foe: time. If he does not win quickly, he will not win at all. In my own case I parried the thrust of an attacker with ease, and dispatched the maker of it at once. The second died nearly as fast. The third -"

At this point, the door of Tiero's lodgings was kicked down by a red-faced

Mercus. A moment later Mercus shouted, "Deceiver! Adulteress!"

He shouted these things indeed, and more; but being a man of some experience in these matters, he did not shout them until the point of his blade had found Tiero's throat.

##Commentary

While it is easy to identify Tiero's brand of heroism and gallantry as false and self-serving, there is still a slight bit of sympathy for the false bravado that Tiero employs: underneath all the things he has learned, he doubts that he actually deserves his reputation, and knows that he has to prove it. His failure is in believing that the Hour of the Sheep could only occur before his encounters, and only in looking for masculine, direct foes. However, he has no one to blame for his death but himself - the difference between bravery and foolhardiness can be subtle - though it isn't in this case, since Tiero spends enormous effort looking for a fight. Mercus returns to catch him completely unaware in his own home, as he boasts of easily defeating the three swordsmen ... ironically just as the third one, whose ears should be ringing from his mention, kicks in Tiero's door and kills him. The final passage is dripping with the kind of irony Wolfe

loves: claiming that the fight was unavoidable, Tiero had to look for it all night long, patrolling up and down and trying to start fights - so unavoidable as to remain almost undiscovered.

As far as his prowess in battle, Tiero proves capable of defeating enemies when he is prepared (and when his weaponry, "fell Tyrian energy", overmatches the bouncer's club, though he does fight two men with burning swords in saving Mercus's adultery-minded wife). Tiero's advice and instruction are actually fairly interesting and well thought out examples, though he allows, as most of Wolfe's characters do, his unconscious ego and bias to distract him from the actual lesson of his book. Once again we have a narrator deluding himself, though in this case the overall societal ennui and decadence clearly contribute to his attitude: he has been proclaimed "the greatest swordsman of all" with no real experience, but he was not the one who made that proclamation. Indeed, it is his lingering doubt that he actually knows anything that isn't just regurgitated that sets him upon his belligerent path of smug self-destruction.

The fine irony is present throughout: Mercus's wife claims she would never, ever lie to Tiero, but she does not even reveal her own name, instead pretending to be someone else and fabricating an excuse to go to his house

- for she clearly cannot have him take her to her husband Mercus's home after just escaping his clutches. Tiero was only looking for a very particular type of obvious foe, unaware of the weapons "Ryki" could employ.

One of Wolfe's most straightforward stories, it is quite clear that the wife of Mercus uses flattery to garner the protection of a "white knight", trapping him with her wiles in the titular Hour of the Sheep. The society, besides having the feel of an Italian Renaissance setting run to dissipation and decadence as could be penned by Fritz Leiber or Jack Vance, though it is clearly science fiction. All of the duels and fights which Tiero has participated in have been regulated and controlled, like an amateur pugilist or fencer who has never fought outside a very particular set of rules, and he justifiably wonders if the skills he has been taught are just rote nonsense cast down from teachers or if they actually have practical application. Ostensibly, the motive of the book is to defend others - but no one is there to defend Tiero from the woman he saves, for he lacks the complete picture to make a sound decision. Tiero, paying lip service to the ideal of making the street a safer place, actually acts in his night out recklessly and almost as a bully to try to promote a fatal trouble that still takes hours and hours to find. His reverence for the "President-Protector" is also ironic, for in seeking to impress him and justify what could have been an insincere and offhand remark in polite conversation (which could have run, "Oh, you are a sword master? You should write a book ..."), no one is there to protect Tiero from his own self-congratulatory naivety.

##Names

The names have a certain Vanceian feel to them: the over-confident Tiero of Trin, the merciless Mercus, and the duplicitous Chatelaine-minor di Mirbellos, Corlane Ryki Marella. In general, they seem a mixture of Romance languages without being purely Italian or Latin (in modern Italian, the proper names would all almost certainly end in a vowel rather than the -s or -us of the older Latin style.)

Tiero is an Italian family name which implies "strong army" ... and though there is a small city in Switzerland which goes by the name of Trin, in Italy, "trin" would be recognizable as the sound a horse makes as it trots

- and this is almost certainly intentional, given the way that Tiero tries to make himself as obvious and noisy as possible in his movement through the city, to attract attention. (Tiero may also have a resonance with the word "tyro" - an amateur or novice.)

When Tiero uses his blade, he describes the blade as composed of Tyrian energy - Tyr is the Norse god of law and heroic glory - and he is one handed because the Fenris Wolf bit off his hand. Gene Wolfe will do more than bite off Tiero of Trin's hand ... Ironically, however, Tyr was renowned for his wisdom, something Tiero lacks, though he actually has functional ability. (The name which the temptress wants to be called, Ryki, is also Norse in origin, and means "lone ruler" or "island ruler").

Mirbellos seems to be a derivation of Mirabella, which means someone of wondrous beauty (or, if we approximate its translation directly with a more Spanish root in mind, "behold the beautiful ones" - and Teiro is distracted from his life by her beauty.) Her last name, Marella, means "shining sea". While the meaning of her first name, Corlane, does not seem to be universally agreed upon, the first part may be derived from "crow" and can imply a talkative person (though in its Norse etymology it implies a ravine, which would fit more thematically with the sea and island imagery of the other names she probably makes up). In addition, it ties her to Mercus, who has a rather strange name composed of what seems to be a root for "sea" or "lake" augmenting the more traditional name Marcus, which means someone dedicated to Mars or Ares, the Greek and Roman gods of war. The god Tyr is also tied to war and is sometimes considered a Norse cognate of Mars.

Attenis could be an ancient, uncommon spelling of Athens, so perhaps the city in question with the anecdote of the goddess is meant to be either Athens itself or to resonate with it as a center of culture which was appropriated and almost forgotten in the time of the ascendancy of Rome and Italy. Its statue of the goddess, which was meant to embody beauty, is dressed up ridiculously, given shoes, beads, and a hat, thereby accessorizing and making ridiculous something which has no need to be so decorated - the essence of the goddess is not in any of that excess, just as the essence of heroism and combat is not in the excessive bravado and self-aggrandizement that Tiero seeks ... though it *is* underneath there, when the gaudy clothes and extra decoration are stripped away.

While perhaps irrelevant to the story, the title President-Protector would be known to Wolfe, born in Texas, from the historical Jose Bernardo de Gutierrez, who was given the title of "President Protector of the State of Texas" after declaring it independent from Spain in 1813 (Chipman 250).

##Unanswered questions

The technology of the sword Tiero uses has a demon stone to activate it, and probably resembles the energy emanation of Patera Silk's azoth as well. What is the relationship between this story and **The Book of the Long Sun**? There is a moon in the sky, so it does not seem that the setting is the Whorl.

How did Mercus find Tiero's living quarters so easily?

##Connection with other works

Although not a very complicated story, the fine portrayal of ironic decadence and arrogance is highly stylized and very effective. The story works very well on a first read in the same fashion as "In the House of Gingerbread" - an ironic denouement that, for an instant, makes us pity someone who probably doesn't quite deserve it, for Tiero's story is filled to the brim with situational and verbal irony. Wolfe's use of irony is most effective in stories with characters who are blind to some flaw or shortcoming in their character, and examples of this include the Nebraskan in "The Nebraskan and the Nereid" and the first person narrator of "Redbeard", who

clearly evinces a modern attitude which Wolfe is actually excoriating as unlivable.

Tiero of Trin is one of Wolfe's finest short ironic character sketches: a man with some knowledge and ability but no common sense and a complete lack of understanding for his own true motivations - if he had taken his own advice (or simply not patrolled for trouble all night long), he would still be alive.

##Resources

-Chipman, Donald E. and Harriet Denise Joseph. *Spanish Texas, 1519-1821: Revised Edition.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010. Print.