

In every waking moment, we are challenged to cherish or overlook the blessings within and around us. Each of the stories in this collection hinges on whether "hidden gold" is discovered, ignored, embraced, or buried. May you find some that shines for you.

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The Name of the King

A mighty sovereign did escape
His enemies of war.
By stealth the rogues had captured him
Not quite two days before.

Unarmored and on foot across
The countryside went he,
And not a soul who saw him would
Know him for royalty.

He for the nonce must stay in flight
Till he'd reclaim his steel.
But when he rejoined the fight
They would feel the might of the king.

As dusk approached, he came upon
What might have been a farm,
'Twas in no state for planting,
But could shelter him from harm.

The woman there seemed not the sort
Inclined to take a guest,
So in their liege's name he begged
A place that night to rest.

"Stop, vagabond! Have you no shame?
I'll not shed you a tear.
Though my stable's yours to claim,
I'll not hear the name of the king!

"So eager was our prince to prove
His fighting father's son,
He tore this land to shreds, and yet
The bloodshed's never done.

"Our farm has failed, like all the rest,
Since he took up the throne.
His wars devoured my sons and husband:
Now I'm here alone."

She spoke, every word a poisoned dart,
Bitter, hard, and fierce,
Without courtesy or art,
And it pierced the heart of the king.

He slept on straw and bid the widow
Farewell on the morn.
By noon, his men saw him return,
And blew the battle-horn.

"Your Majesty is back! And now,
To slaughter them we go!"
"Belay that," said the king, "and call
A parley with the foe."

"My liege," said his marshal, "that's absurd!
You've got them! Why release?"
"Because my command you've heard!
Now make peace the word of the king!"

He yielded up his conquests,
Told his generals to disband.
He sent his soldiers home, poured out
His coffers to the land.

No glory earns a king who lays
His father's sword to rust:
The nobles and their chroniclers
Consigned him to the dust.

But in the countryside, his fame
The generations cheered:
Like a bright, enduring flame,
They revered the name of the king.

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The Bastard's Tale

In the village I hail from a man met a maid,
He was caught by her unblemished face.
He professed her his love and she flushed and she smiled
And she took him into her embrace.

But the man was a noble of lofty degree
And his duty soon called him to home.
When he told her the truth on the night that he left
She confessed she had news of her own.

He gave her a bastard! They said,
For worthy she wasn't to wife.
The blood of my childbirth left her with a stain
That she wore for the rest of her life.

So when I was a boy, she would try to explain
Why it was we were always alone.
As I grew into manhood, it harder became
To find ways to keep flesh on our bones.

As my mother grew weak, I worked hard every day
On my strength and my speed and my blade.
When she fell ill, I knocked upon door after door
Seeking pay in an honest man's trade.

Nay, you worthless bastard! I heard.
They all saw that villainous brand.
My blood boiled within me that I be denied
For a thing in which I had no hand.

I found other employment to which I was suited—
No pride, but the payment was...good.
So my mother's last days knew a doctor and comfort;
I buried her as a son should.

'Twas a few weeks ago that I spied a young man
In the clothing and manner well-born,
But the badge on his coat was one I'd heard described
And his face, it was much like my own.

Gods, stand up for bastards! I prayed.
Protect me, and I'll make you smile.
His blood is no thicker than mine at the source
And the color we'll know in a while.

Now the deed, it's been done with professional skill,
And I don't care if I've been fate's pawn;
For my father knows now he has only one heir:
Here I am, on the gallows at dawn.

Think you I'm a bastard? I ask.
Your answer I know in advance.
The river can't separate your blood from mine;
That is done on the rocks we call chance.

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The Last Plantagenet

Richard the Third, I say you all!
Was there ever a king so vile?
Stabbing his long way to the throne
With a traitor's self-serving smile.

What a fiend! O how glad the people were,
When King Henry destroyed this brute.
So say the Tudor histories,
And they're surely beyond dispute.

How on earth to bury such a king?
Hold no funeral, throw a fête!
Still, we must ask, is this the truth
Of the last Plantagenet?

Fiercely young Richard armies led
To defend brother Edward's throne.
Their middle brother traitor turned,
And his life forfeit to atone.

But when Edward at forty died from vice,
And Protector he Richard named,
Caught, unprepared, 'twixt widow Queen
And the Kingmakers' warring claims.

His advisers all were chess masters,
Each one scheming against a threat.
Swiftly the pawn did king himself,
As the last Plantagenet.

Had he his nephew Princes killed?
It could be: Richard was no saint.
But if he erred in dealing death,
It was toward mercy and restraint.

For he left noble houses well intact,
And great trouble for him they'd make...
Unlike the Tudors' bloody reigns
For they never made that mistake.

When King Henry gave the death decree,
Did his father-in-law regret
Having switched sides and sealed the fate
Of the last Plantagenet?

Two years upon the throne: not long
For a king to perfect his art.
Courtly intrigues were not his taste,
And he never could play the part.

But if most of the nobles loved him not,
To the common folk he was true,
Freeing us from corruption's grip:
Aye, he did what king must do.

If it be his only legacy
That the poor might escape from debt,
Deeply indeed his people mourned
For the last Plantagenet.

Bravely did our abandoned king
Meet his ending on Bosworth field,
Felled by a ring of twenty swords,
To the last, though, he would not yield.

He was too much the soldier, swift to act,
Surely this was his fatal trait.
Now he's remade, by Tudor scribes,
Patient schemer for all to hate.

Did they bury Richard? Just his name,
And the rest are we bid forget.
Let us blame thirty years of strife
On the last Plantagenet.

Though they call him England's enemy,
In my mind, I can see him yet:
Twenty armed men all bearing down
On the last Plantagenet.

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Tam Lin of the Elves

One fortnight past came you to Carterhaugh
And two roses you plucked without care.
Surely you learned, if you take what is mine
That your trespass will summon me there?

Here you are once again, Janet so bold,
Who declared that this wood was your land.
Are you now bashful? I see you recall
How you trembled when I took your hand.

For you'd ignored advice.
You knew the tales they tell
Of ev'ry maiden's price
If she met Tam Lin of the Elves.

Pull you no more, lady, that's not a rose
But an herb that grows deadly and wild.
I know the weed, it's procured for the use
Of a woman to rid her of child.

Is that the way of it, Janet my sweet,
Have you come back confess'd of your plight?
Told your lord father that you're fathered on
By an unholy grey Elfin knight?

I'm not this thing you scorn,
Though I forget myself.
I was of woman born
Ere I was Tam Lin of the Elves.

I was a lad in my grandfather's hunt
When I careless from saddle was thrown,
Caught by a lady—the Queen of the Elves—
And she stole me away as her own.

Years have I spent among Elf-land's delights
And the Queen's beauty held me in thrall.
Oft here on Carterhaugh stumbled a maid,
And my pleasure I'd take of them all.

But then I looked on you,
And something new I felt.
'Tis since that day I rue
That I am Tam Lin of the Elves.

Though I returned to their magical realm,
It has savored me naught since we met.
Dark Faery hearts do not know mortal love
But my own heart won't let me forget.

I, before this, was the Queen's favored knight,
But now, Janet, I'm deeply afeard.
Faery-land's magic, it comes with a price
At the ending of each seventh year.

Tonight is Hallow's E'en,
They pay a tithe to Hell.
I think tonight the Queen
Will give up Tam Lin of the Elves.

Save your child's father from Faery you might,
But my love, it's a dangerous task.
And were it any lass other than you
I would not such a favor dare ask.

At Dryburgh Abbey you'll find an old well
And from there, at Miles Cross you must hide.
Round about midnight you'll hear horse approach:
One by one will the Elven host ride.

Past you the the black will speed,
Let pass the brown as well.
Run to the the milk-white steed
And pull down Tam Lin of the Elves.

Still now, my dearest, I'm bound to the Queen,
So I know not what form I will take.
I'll be an eagle who tries to pull free—
The next moment, a venomous snake...

Then will she make me a bear in your arms
And I'll bite and I'll and claw at you so.

Next I'll become a red-hot iron brand,
And I'll burn you to make you let go!

But if you hold me fast,
Carry me down the dell,
I can be yours at last
And no more Tam Lin of the Elves.

My love she carried me near half a mile,
Although ev'ry step wracked her with pain.
Threw the hot iron in that holy well,
And a naked man took out again.

Then did she cover me out of their sight
In her green mantle, smelling of sage.
Just as we came to the safe Abbey doors
Did the Faery Queen cry out in rage:

"I'd pluck his eyes away
That my fair land beheld!
I want her life as pay
Who took my Tam Lin of the Elves!"

But she had done it, son,
Fair Janet broke the spell,
And for her husband won
Your father, Tam Lin of the Elves.

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Lady of the Rose

What is this game that you've stumbled upon?
Is it fairy-tale or history?
Armor and weapons and courtly intrigue—
Well, perhaps you've found where you belong.

Now there's a stir from the end of the hall—
As the crowd parts before her you see,
Everyone bowing as they greet the Queen,
And she's radiant, gracious and strong...

This is a role someone asked her to play,
What would that be like, do you suppose?
Op'ning her petals to fullest display,
Everyone smiles and admires when they look on a rose...

Suddenly you're sitting next to a Queen,
As you watch your man fighting for crown.
Talk to him briefly between every bout
To make sure that his head's in the game.

Push back your nerves, and make certain to smile,
You're a heartbeat away from renown.
And, there it is! Yes, they all saw the blow!
And now things never will be the same...

This is a role that you're destined to play,
All because you're the woman he chose.
Open your petals to fullest display,
Everyone smiles—when they look at you, they see a rose...

Hail the Crown Princess! And now it begins,
For you want to live up to that name.
Don't drop the scepter, or trip on the dress...
You keep watching to learn what to do.

Her Majesty smiles and says you're doing fine,
For no two Queens are ever the same.
Only be true to who you really are
She's certain you'll find your way through...

Is this a role that you're ready to play?
For you've noticed each season it grows.
Open your petals to fullest display,
Everyone smiles if they can't see the thorns on the rose...

What does it mean that they call you a Queen?
It means endlessly planning details.
All eyes are on you wherever you go,
So be part of it! Join in the fun.

Give recognition for what people do,
Be the wind that will fill up their sails.
Courtesy always—the standard is you!
It seems endless, but soon 'twill be done...

This is a role that you wanted to play,
And your work, if it's good, never shows.
Open your petals to fullest display,
Everyone smiles and applauds as they hand you your
rose...

Now there's a new Queen who stands where you stood,
And you've time for yourself once again.
Still, as a Countess or Duchess, you learn
That things aren't as they used to be...

You still must carry yourself like a Queen,
Though no longer the burden of reign.
Now you must listen more often than speak,
And give comfort when you see the need...

This is a role that you'll never not play,
And perhaps you grow stiff from the pose.
Open your petals to fullest display,
Everyone smiles when they see a Lady of the Rose...

This is a role that you always shall play,
And you're one of the handful who knows.
Open your petals to fullest display,
Everyone smiles and admires a Lady of the Rose.

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My Thirst

Beg pardon, sir, but is an ox-cart resting on my head?
The dirt beneath my cheek tells me I never found the bed.
It's not a pretty thing greets me on opening my eyes,
I liked the taste when it went down, but now it's drawing flies.

Though last night I was bottomless, it feels now like I've
burst!
They all talk of my drinking, but never of my thirst!

One morning I awoke, and though I couldn't kneel or stand,
An old man's crossbow let me know my wedding was at hand.
I'd lain down with a comely lass much sweeter than a grape,
But I'd mistook for flavor what turned out to be her shape.

I'm not the last to drink I loved her, and I warn't the first!
She tells them of my drinking, but never of my thirst!

Last week I saw a man whose visage brought to mind a louse,
Much like the lord upon whose lands I rent my leaky house!
"My friend", I cried, "I'd like a word," and in his face I spit.
"I don't care that there's three of you, the middle I can hit!"

I've lost my home, I've lost two teeth, it seems that I'm
accurst!
Now he talks of my drinking, but never of my thirst!

When will I learn, they ask? How often must I do me harm?
"It must be fifty times—but still, a fifth might be the charm!"
So then they ask what ails me, and have I lost my mind?
I say, "An ale is just the thing, if you would be so kind!"

Of all the sots they've ever met, they swear that I'm the
worst!
They all talk of my drinking, but never of my thirst!

Whene'er a trickle I do hear, my lips are ready-pursed!
They all talk of my drinking, but never of my thirst!

When I was born, they argue on what sort of milk I nursed!
They all talk of my drinking, but never of my thirst!

If you've a cask or vat, beware! You might find me
immersed!
Then you'll talk of my drinking, but never of my thirst!
They all talk of my drinking, but never of my thirst!

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Call Me Will

Come to the window, my love, listen well, can you hear it?
Beckoning you is the voice that has haunted your dream.
Leave here the cross made of rowan; you're guided by spirit!
Surely you'll find what you're seeking outside by the stream...

Feel the wind cut sharp through your dress,
Nothing you can hide that I can't caress.
Come away, love... Have I a name? Call me Will.

Come, cross the bridge, follow Will, he can see that you're
aching.
Most wouldn't notice, they'd say you're a wisp of a girl.
Will loves a wisp and he knows when she's ready for taking.
See how his song makes you dance as you smile and you twirl...

Like the river, pulled ever on,
You'll have walked so far when they know you're gone
That they may, love, never track you down the hill.

See not the rags that I wear nor the leaves in my hair, love.
Will leads you on through the night by the sparks in his eyes.
Deep through the woods, just a bit further on and we're there,
love.
Will has prepared a delight, and for you, a surprise...

You are fire, burning within,
All the heat you hold in that tender skin
Might allay, love, some of my heart's icy chill.

Take a few steps in the mire, and you feel yourself sinking.
Will stops the fear in your eyes with a languorous kiss.
Child, did you not hear my warnings? Oh, what were you
thinking?
No, you're not thinking at all, Will has trapped you in bliss...

Into earth I'll take you at last,
And I'll own you all and I'll hold you fast
For I'm Fae, love, just close your eyes and be still.

Yes, I'm Fae, love, Will-of-the-Wisp... Call me Will.

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The Seed

The sky and earth first meet the moment when
The seed dives through the soil. If water she
Provides it, and with strength and warmth should he
Respond, when shoot breaks forth they touch again.

One might refer to it as love, but too
Soon is it yet, for many seeds that failed
He's harbored; and thus far, none have prevailed
Of all the young leaves she has whispered through.

The nature of the plant is not in doubt,
However; as to how and if it grows,
The shape it takes, the sort of fruit that goes
Forth from it—if you wait, you will find out;

But in the seed must sky and earth invest
Themselves, before its fullness can be guessed.

I'll chance it on this seed—I need no reason
Save it's to my liking. For its toil,
I offer it my warmest, softest soil;
A fertile spot for it to try the season.

But now I worry for it—from the sky
Poured rains which promised so that shoot and roots
Came forth; but now inconstant wind disputes
If green will grow before my land wears dry.

Though Love must many seasons live and grow
Before it blooms, the one in which it's sprung
Is vital, as it struggles weak and young
For purchase; now it most needs help. And so,

I offer warmth and comfort to sustain
This tender life—and pray for light and rain.

Poem © 2000 Eric Schragger ASCAP

Can She Excuse My Wrongs

Can she excuse my wrongs with Virtue's cloak?
Shall I call her good when she proves unkind?
Are those clear fires which vanish into smoke?
Must I praise the leaves where no fruit I find?

No, no, where shadows do for bodies stand
Thou may'st be abus'd if thy sight be dim.
Cold love is like to words written on sand
Or to bubbles which on the water swim.

Wilt thou be thus abused still
Seeing that she will right thee never?
If thou cans't not o'ercome her will
Thy love will be thus fruitless ever.

Was I so base, that I might not aspire
Unto those high joys which she holds from me?
As they are high, so high is my desire
If she this deny, what can granted be?

If she will yield to that which Reason is
It is Reason's will that Love should be just
Dear, make me happy still by granting this
Or cut off delays if that I die must

Better a thousand times to die
Than for to live thus still tormented
Dear, but remember it was I
Who for thy sake did die contented.

Words Anonymous, music by John Dowland
From The First Booke of Songs or Aires, 1597

Changeling

(2nd and 4th lines repeat in each verse)

Beltane has fallen, Fair Folk, hear me true.
Jewel I held at my breast.
Hither from Elf-Hame I beckon to you.
O how I weep without rest.

I bore a babe and he filled me with joy.
One night your people made off with my boy.

Once he was laughing and calling to me.
In our house now sits his shape, but not he.

Wailing or silent, but never he talks.
Beats at his head as he thrashes and rocks.

Coax though I might, he will not meet my eye.
I house your changeling. I beg of you, why?

Need you a man-child who's clever and kind?
Some other servant I know you could find.

Naught say you, Fair Folk? Your meaning is plain.
He's et your food, I'll not see him again.

Treat my son well, and I'll make you a vow.
Jewel I held at my breast.
I'll love this changeling as best I know how.
Mayhap we both may find rest.

Words and music © 2012 Eric Schragger ASCAP

Mug Your Gate

Good gentles, do you, of an eve,
Wish that you had a slight reprieve
From all the doldrums in your camp,
Without the risk of walking cramp?

Would you like merriment
That doesn't cost a cent?
So that you can prevent loud complainers?
Now, friends, there is indeed
A way to call, with speed,
"Quick! To our camp! We need entertainers!"

On your mug some ribbon tie
(Or some cloth—no need to buy!)
Hang this mug upon your gate,
Then, good friends, you've but to wait.

This practice comes from Calontir,
Now it is spreading far and near.
Performers soon will spy your sign,
And say "An audience! How divine!"

Singers will wander through,
Bards with tales old and new,
All will endeavor to lift your spirit!
A steady trickle of
Antics ridiculous,
You'll feel a tickle of joy to hear it!

Hang that mug before your fire,
Take it down when you retire.
Mug your gate, that's all you do.
Mug your gate, we'll come to you!

Some who are pleased will offer food,
That's at your whim, and per your mood.
Water or drink is kind, dear friend,
And a good signal we should end.

Wish you a different song?
Have we come on too strong?
Are we just running long? Pray, do tell us!
We know a proper set
Is a few minutes, yet
Once in a while, we get over-zealous!

Mug your gate, and we'll come play.
Fill our mugs, we're on our way.
Mugs with ribbons on your doors,
Mirth and stories will be yours!

Mug your gate, and we'll regale,
Half an hour, or just one tale.
Gifts we'll bring you from the Muse...
Mug your gate, it's yours to choose!

Words © 2013 Eric Schragar ASCAP
Music from "Watkins Ale",
Anonymous Elizabethan broadside, 1595

Hidden Gold

So, young lad, you ask if I'll agree to teach you,
But I know that you're a colt who won't be led.
So cocksure and full of pride, my words will never reach you.
For today, please take this leather pouch instead.

You hold virtues, waiting for you to embrace them,
But until you look at them, they can't shine true.
In the pouch, three golden coins I'll name as I place them:
And this is all I have to give 'til you can see them too!

CHORUS:

One, for the courage that's buried inside you.
Two, for the truth you conceal in the fold.
Three, for the love that you've always denied you.
Now go seek: Be bold!
Never rest 'til you find your hidden gold.

So my hat he hands me, and he sends me packing!
I'm not fit to study with the likes of him.
Then the old man dares me to discover what I'm lacking.
Must I with this talisman indulge his whim?

How I long to hurl away this token gleaming,
Flee this latest challenge as I've always done.
No! The master sees inside me something redeeming,
And I will find the courage to pursue until it's won!

CH

He tells me I'm arrogant: the charge, it stings me.
An unflatt'ring mirror is this golden piece.
For all that my muse is potent, it no pleasure brings me
If it serves no purpose but my own increase.

There's a deeper truth behind my puff and poses,
Though I entertain folk and they may applaud.
Tear away the mask and underneath it exposes
That if they truly knew me, they would scorn me as a fraud!

CH

There's the final coin, so bright I fear to hold it,
Oh that kind regard I have pursued from birth.
Evermore withheld—or is it as the master told it?
Am I truly author of my heart's own worth?

If I trust in me, could I hold space for others?
No one's love but mine is keeping me apart.
If my mission is to serve my sisters and brothers
Then surely I must learn the craft of serving from the heart!

CH

Well, lad, welcome back. I see that you've been seeking.
Have you found some answers as I hoped you might?
I can tell you have: it's in your face as you are speaking.
You've dug deep inside, and brought some truth to light.

Thus your path to wisdom starts by touching sorrow,
There's a strong foundation in what you have learned.
We can start your lessons here the same time tomorrow.
No no, lad, keep the talisman. It's well and truly earned!

CH

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