

The Jester's Bliss (Part 1 of 2)

by *C D Regan*

It was raining when they arrived that night, but that didn't slow the raising of the big top. The poles, polished to a deep red-black from innumerable hands setting them in place, had an almost crystalline depth to their sheen. As they were raised to support the canvas, Balil always thought they looked like the legs of a fossilized spider, resurrected from death, opening to ensnare one final meal.

He liked it when it rained. It made it so much easier for him to burrow.

Now, he just had to find a good spot to begin.

Balil walked around the perimeter of the circus camp, taking in the smell of the earth. The rain unlocks all the special smells that say so much. The stories of the land bubble up and out from shriveled plants, animal corpses, and fungi. He took a deep breath, whistling cool air through his wide nose.

And smiled.

There was old violence done here.

Balil bent down and began to sniff closer to the ground. Rotting wood and cloth. Old decayed teeth. Copper. Gunpowder. Oil and paper and meat. All long gone artifacts remembered only by a few molecules curling through the mud. Balil extended his long milky yellow tongue and lapped at a puddle. He closed his eyes and began to see.

Open blue sky.

The smell of leather and sweaty horses wafted along to the creaks of wood banded with metal. A faint hint of lavender reached him. There was a woman in a floral printed dress that rode in the back a wagon made from these things. She is the one that smelled like lavender. She was trying to read a book, but the rocky road made her eyes jump uncontrollably between words and she was getting a headache. She put the book down.

The caravan had traveled without incident from Georgia. Melinda tried to look forward to starting a new life with her brother and daughter, and painted herself a picture of California being encrusted with gold, fruit on every tree, and crystal clear waterfalls in which she could

secretly bathe. There were certainly no porcelain nor marble private rooms granted to her these last few weeks, and the fantasy kept her from weeping.

Their plantation, as was her husband, a casualty of the war. Her brother, Daniel, had returned from Gettysburgh with one less eye and a heart full of hate. He couldn't stand to see their family home destroyed. Thoughts of rebuilding were shattered when it was learned that most of their money had been put into the war effort against the North. Her father was a patriot, but sometimes, foolishly so. Father's enthusiasm to ensure their way of life by helping finance the South's campaigns had been their undoing. California was a new beginning. They would be far enough away to hopefully not be reminded of their loss.

Daniel had found a man to lead the caravan, a Mr. Anders, a large Swedish gentleman who couriered legal documents between the coasts. His cargo was important enough to merit highly experienced guards on these cross-country travels, but not so important to the average highwayman that made their travels treacherous. As a side-job, Mr. Anders led settlers to California. Melinda hated to think of herself as a "settler" and remained aloof from the others traveling with them.

Balil pulled his tongue back into his mouth and rolled it around for a while. He got down on his hands and knees and slopped around, sniffing for more.

Another story. A good story. A story was below this spot that Balil could really enjoy. He began to dig.

The mud piled up on all sides of the hole, unleashing the savagery stuck in this ground. Stones cut into his fingers, and his fingernails were pushed wide by the dirt, but the stinging drove him on. More gunpowder and blood was here. Dying breaths mixed with diseased phlegm. He stopped for a moment when he came across the remnants of some cinnamon that spilled from someone's kitchen supplies. He didn't like that smell. Deeper now, and finally, again, the lavender smell, and more gunpowder.

Mr. Anders had stopped the caravan. He seemed to be looking to the mountains the same way Melinda would look to her God for answers. He held his hand up to signal the caravan to stop, but it already had. Save for the snorts of horses, all was silent.

Mr. Anders leaned over to Mr. Camp, his assistant, and then dismounted. He squatted down and closely examined the dirt for tracks. He looked

over toward the South, where an outcropping of rocks began. Melinda followed his eyes, and saw that the outcropping was the edge of a stone formation that ahead would encircle them. She stretched her neck to see the trail ahead leading through the rocks far on the other side. Adjusting her position made the seat creak on its springs, and Daniel pulled her back into her seat beside him, causing a violent eruption of creaks.

"Don't be making noise, now. He's tracking," Daniel snarled.

Melinda looked at him, wondering how much was left of the man that he was before he went to war. Daniel did not return her gaze. He was watching Mr. Anders. Now, Anders was looking to the North, where the other side of the mountainous crescent began. Large pines could have been hiding several horsemen. Anders stood, and casually returned to his horse.

"No, no water around here," he said to Mr. Camp in a voice that was raised loud enough for Melinda to hear clearly. A near-parody of a Norwegian sing-song came out in this line. The few times that Melinda had spoken to him, Mr. Anders had an exceptionally crisp English accent; it was amazing how she could perceive him so differently when he spoke with a Swedish accent. He seemed almost playful and innocuous. Melinda knew that he had been in at least one deadly skirmish during his travels, and the face he wore was very stern, framed by the sun-etched lines in his face. The sing-song voice seemed to be such a contradiction to what she knew.

"I'm going to tell ev-ary one to take it slow. We need to be care-full of rocks. Don't need a sprained ankle on any of these horses." The sing song again. Melinda smiled at the thought of this new person he had become. As he approached, she saw that his stern face was back, and her smile began to melt. Mr. Anders stopped at the first wagon, smiled and nodded enthusiastically, and after speaking to the driver at length, patted him on the shoulder. His pasted-on smile dropped quickly as he moved on to the next wagon in line. Theirs.

The sounds of his horse's approaching hooves carried some menace. The smile was back, but it was so forced on his face; it made Melinda cringe.

"Smile and nod while I tell you this, okay?" The English accent was back. "Miss, you may want to get into the back of the wagon and load any guns you have. Dan, you just follow my lead, but keep your rifle handy. If I give the call, I told you how to make a circle—just wheel it around like I showed you. We may be doing that shortly. Keep

watching me. Smile, now, and nod your head."

Melinda heard the rest of the conversation from the back of the wagon. Daniel had a pistol and another rifle, along with ammunition right behind the seat. She knew how to load them from when the Yankees attacked the plantation.

Mr. Anders continued to instruct Daniel.

"Now, everything is going to be okay. My men and I have a lot of experience with robbers and the like, and whoever is out there is usually nothing more than out of work drunkards who couldn't shoot their own foot off if they were aiming at it, so don't worry. I just want you to be ready. We'll be advancing slowly. Smile."

Melinda heard Mr. Anders slap Daniel on the shoulder and started to ride on to the next wagon. Daniel took a deep breath and let it out in a quivering stream. Melinda took a deep breath and began to check the rifle.

Daniel tried to be comforting by behaving like the big brother he hoped to be. "Melinda, dear, don't you worry. You heard that they're probably just some disorderly bunch looking for trouble. Anders and his crew are professionals. That's why I hired him."

"I know, Daniel. I'm fine."

Melinda considered asking her brother if he would be okay in a fight with only one eye, but she knew he was already self-conscious enough about having to leave the army because of that wound. Other soldiers fought on with less, he would say, and she knew he felt like less of a man because of his dismissal.

The rifle was loaded.

Mr. Anders was moving down the row. There were seven wagons if you counted the chuck wagon. Irish, the cook, acted like he had seen more than his share of skirmishes out in these wild places, and a thought of him frying up an egg in the middle of a gun fight made Melinda snuffle back a laugh.

"You okay?" Daniel so needed to be the one to comfort her, and, realizing this, she knew it would be better if she seemed brave and quietly crying rather than brave and quietly laughing, and sniffed again, and squeaked out a "...Yeah. I'm okay."

Melinda looked up toward the driver of the wagon behind them. She didn't bother to remember their names, but she knew their faces well enough. She felt their distaste for her and her old money. She knew that they thought she could never survive the life that they were used to. She probably had less pairs of shoes than they had calluses on their hands, and that was saying a lot. Her father knew a Jewish shoemaker in Louisiana, and she amassed many pairs over the years.

Kimberly, her daughter, was still asleep. The doctors said that the outside air would make her cough worse, exposed to all kinds of pollens and molds. The color in her face was much better than when they started, and Melinda imagined that maybe by the time they get to California, Kimberly will be running around chasing butterflies and playing with the dog they intend to get.

More fantasies? Melinda prayed almost hourly that her daughter would get better, but she knew that consumption was rarely cured. The travel was at least a distraction from the decaying surroundings of the plantation, and she had enough medicine to last the whole trip. Hopefully, whatever danger they were now facing would amount to nothing more than an adventure story they would be able to tell their grandchildren.

Mr. Anders' horse was trotting back to its place up front. Melinda heard it pass by their wagon. This time, the heavy hooves, crunching leather and jingling spurs gave her a sense of security. Mr. Anders was not a man she could ever consider loving, but he was certainly someone she respected. He had a solidity to him, like the old elm tree in the yard. It was there when she was a girl, and she was sad to leave it behind when they left the plantation. She did not love the tree, either, but it was part of her family. He would make a superb uncle.

The wagon began to move. The pace was tentative at first, everyone unsure of the correct pace, and what to expect. In a minute or two, the tension seemed to slip from her mind. There were no gunshots, no wild Indian screams, and no galloping horses. No, just the steady clop of Hester and Milktoast, their horses, and the creaks and jangles of the wagon.

Melinda tucked Kimberly's blanket down a little, then sat behind Daniel's seat. The sun-warmed canvas and the steady slow rocking of the wagon made her lids heavy, and she succumbed to its weight.

Balil curled his knees up in the damp space he had dug and sucked on something he found in the ground there, settling back for the rest of the story. There was a loud crash and the chime of falling chains.

Distant yells.

Hoofbeats hit the ground with shattering clarity, and Melinda woke with a dull headache. Kimberly was calling for her from under something that muffled her voice. Grandma's comforter—the one that smelled of cedar. How could she know that? She couldn't see a thing, it was dark. It was the middle of the night, and the cart wasn't moving.

"Mommy!" Kimberly was terrified, and the sick child who seemed resigned to inevitable death during her daily life was now bitterly and primally afraid. The last part of her call erupted in a shrill that made Melinda jump up blindly to her feet. Her hands met warm fur.

TO BE CONTINUED...