

The Last Word

In Old Crone & Thief Tales

by

Celli The Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod

(c) 2008 Copyright Brett Paufler
www.Paufler.net
Brett@Paufler.net

The thief couldn't afford a booth, so he sat alone, on the floor, in a corner. He was hoping no one in the tavern would notice him, that no one would realize the mug of beer he been slowly nursing for the last hour was now gone. He couldn't afford another one, and he didn't want to leave. But after a minute more he realized there was nothing left to do.

He slowly got up. Once he was standing he stalled by dusting himself off with great precision, but it didn't do any good. Under the dust was dirt. Sadly, this was the only thing keeping the grime he called clothes from falling apart.

One thing was for certain; he had to get it together. He had to make a score, and soon... but first one more beer.

These days he was singing for his beer. It was a humiliating experience. He had been a bard, a skilled singer, years ago. He still was -- if the truth be told -- but in this bar singing wasn't about

skill, beauty, or poetry. Here it was about humiliation, heckling, and endless abuse. If you were lucky, afterwards when you walked around the room, some of the patrons might take pity on you and pour their leftovers into your cup.

They used to throw gold coins at his feet, but tonight the thief would sing for backwash. If he was lucky, he'd get half a pint for his troubles, a half of pint of syrupy spit laden brew.

#####

The thief did not relish the prospect, and he had little patience for the old crone who was blocking his way.

"You're in my way, Sonny," she hissed from a mouth missing more teeth than it had left. The thief tried to walk around her, but the old crone hopped back into his way.

She smiled at him with a gleam in her eye, "You're slow, Sonny."

"I don't have time for this," the thief wearily explained. "I'm going to go sing."

"I know," the crone replied. "I heard you before." She thrust a full mug of beer into his chest. Beer splashed over his clothes as she continued, "It was awful. I'm paying you not to sing."

Had he really fallen that low? At one time he had been a great singer. Now a decrepit spinster with a sour attitude was bribing him not to open his mouth.

"Take the mug stupid," the old crone prompted before she paused to eye the thief over. "Unless you're into that spit infested, backwash swill?"

The thief wasn't. He took the beer.

"First smart thing you've done all night," the old crone said while handing him another beer. "Now carry our drinks over to that table."

#####

When they were seated the old crone whispered conspiratorially, "I've got a proposition for you."

The thief grimaced as he imagined the worst. Even he had his limits.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Sonny," the crone continued, but then she remembered the grimace. She might be old, but she still had her vanity. "How old do you think I am anyway, Sonny?"

The thief was drunk, not stupid. "Twenty? Twenty two?" he replied evasively.

"Quit yanking my chain. How old do I look?"

The thief regarded the crone. She had long unruly white hair streaked here and there with a last wisp of fading gray and wrinkles so deep whole families of lice and fleas had been lost in the creases long years ago never to be seen again.

"Eighty? Ninety? Hundred?"

"Three hundred and forty seven," the crone said in a slow whisper as she beamed ecstatically.

"The years have been kind to you," the thief agreed. Considering it all, it was true.

"I accredit it to clean living," the crone remarked as she scratched her jowls, "that and anti-aging cream." And with that she reached into her ragged clothes to reveal a sagging wrinkled breast. She gave it a good bounce. "Without the cream, these babies would have been dragging on the floor two hundred years ago, but look at them," the crone commanded

The thief stared in horror.

"Ah. That's the problem with kids these days. They're too young," the crone remarked absentmindedly as she tossed the sagging tit into the air and caught it like a ball in a sock. "You don't have the depth of perspective required to appreciate the alternatives," she continued. "But about that proposition."

"Really, no offense. It's been so long, I don't even know if it works anymore," the thief said reflexively as he offered up the first excuse that jumped into his head.

“That your problem?” the old crone asked as she eyed him suspiciously. “No matter. I’ve got pills and potions. You should come see me sometime.”

It was too much even for him. The thief started to leave, but crone assured him, “That’s not what I had in mind. You’re a thief, right?”

“What?” the thief asked more than a little confused. So the old crone asked again, only louder this time, “YOU’RE A THIEF RIGHT?” At 347, she was no stranger to people with hearing problems.

“Sshh! Sshh.” The thief looked around worriedly. “Not so loud.”

“Quit wasting my time, Sonny. Do you steal things or not?”

“Sometimes,” the thief acknowledged softly.

“Oh, we’re supposed to whisper, are we? Then this is what I want you to do...” the crone began as she huddled next to the thief, just before the scene started to fade out, as it so often does in these type of stories.

#####

Later that same night, the thief paused at the edge of a clearing. He had found the small hut that the old crone had told him about easily enough. This was where Glenda lived. Apparently the old crone and Glenda had been feuding for the past hundred years. The crone had hired him to steal something valuable from Glenda, anything.

“Something to steal her thunder?” the thief had asked when he thought he had put it all together.

“Yeah,” the crone had agreed as she eyed him wearily. Maybe this thief was too smart.

That had been many hours ago, and now...

The thief had to agree. Maybe he was too smart? This little adventure was going too well. So far, it had all been too easy. The crone had found him down on his luck. Check. The task he had

been hired to do was dubious in nature. Check. The story had blacked out right where it was supposed to. Check. It was all too suspicious; and the thief, well, he knew this was the place in the story when things started to get interesting. He grimaced. He tried to help himself, he really did, but he just couldn't help it. Despite his best intent, the thief steeled himself for the story ahead. He groaned. He had known it was coming. It was inevitable, but still he groaned. And what was worse, he knew that was only the beginning. In a story like this, there were certainly more bad puns like to follow.

No use fighting it. With a shrug the thief entered the clearing and promptly stepped on a twig. It might as well have been a trip-wire. Hi-tech floodlights came on around the thatched hut. A siren's scream filled the air, while behind him a lithe young scantily clad girl asked, "Are you a thief?"

The thief jumped and turned at the same time. It took some doing, but he was a professional after all. Immediately he saw that this was no good. The girl was young, like way too young. He knew the editor would have his hide. Worse, the clothes she was wearing were see-through.

"I mean," the statutory offense waiting to happen -- i.e. the girl -- continued obliquely, "You're not very quiet. I thought thieves were supposed to be quiet and all?"

"Aren't you cold?" It was the only thing that came to the thief's mind. Well, the only the thing that was suitable for the printed page.

The way, way, like really way too young girl twirled about as she showed off her near perfect -- and nearly naked -- body. The thief was in over his head. He needed to get the story back to familiar ground, and pronto!

"I bet that old crone sent you over," the youthful maiden said as she interrupted his thoughts.

The thief didn't deny it. He felt betrayed. "She said you were like hundreds of years old."

“443. I’ll be 444 next March. That’s a big one,” the nubile young princess smiled as she ran her fingers down the thief’s chest. “Now that we know I’m over eighteen, how about...”

“NO!” the thief yelled cutting her off. He could feel the editor’s evil pen ready to...well, edit.

“So, you’re just going to do the stealing bit?” the young girl who only looked like a child but who was really much older than even the old crone and who was therefore not a threat in any way to the established social mores asked in disbelief. (Yeah. I bet you can’t say that three times real fast.)

Oblivious to the challenge at hand, the thief merely shrugged. “I’m a thief. The stealing bit is what I do.”

The deceptively young looking girl took hold of the thief’s hand as she led him towards the hut. She skipped and hummed a tune, while he sulked.

“Why do you look so young?” the thief asked.

“Magic, silly,” the beautiful enchantress remarked as she shook her head condescendingly. “Are you sure you’ve done this before? The old crone thing should have been a dead give away. What 347 year old has a 13 year old as an arch enemy? Truthfully, I don’t know why she does it,” the sweet young girl in the prime of her maidenhood said before she paused for a moment. She didn’t know exactly why, but she liked teasing this thief and she didn’t give a rat’s arse about any nasty old editors. “Look at these firm boobies,” the temptress brazenly continued. “That’s what magic is all about.”

The thief shook his head. This ambiguously aged sorceress would be his undoing.

#####

The enchantress, who may have looked young, but who was actually quite old indeed, led the thief into her hut. Inside, it was like a monstrously huge castle complete bigger than life entry hall. There were fine tapestries on every wall, and full size marble

statues filling the room, not to mention the piles of gold, silver, gems, and jewels lying about, cluttering up the floor. The vixen -- of volatile age -- saw the thief eyeing the jewels. "You can take some if you want, but they'll just turn into rocks outside."

It didn't surprise the thief at all. It was typical fare for this type of story -- the two-bit hack kind -- so he left them where they lay.

When the pair of them got to the kitchen, the magical maiden opened up a small pantry, ducked her head inside, and looked around. "So, what do you want to steal?"

"Something good."

The temptress with a one track mind licked her lips and eyed the thief not innocently as she held up a can with a generic looking label, which read, VIRGINITY.

"NO!" the thief replied aghast. It would be the end of him. He knew editors had strict guidelines regarding that sort of thing. He desperately needed to get this story moving along, but not that way.

The voluptuous -- and newly confirmed -- virginal vamp pouted as she regarded the thief coolly. "If you have any problems, I've got potions and oils..."

"NO! What is it with you witches?"

"443 years going on 444. You'd think it would be easy to get rid of, but..."

"Editors?" the thief said hazarding a guess.

"Editors," the distraught Aphrodite agreed with newfound sympathy. They had a common enemy, a shared nemesis, and with it came a heartfelt feeling of compassion. And of course, on top of all this, the buxomly babe with the crazy chronography could feel the synonyms running out, so without delay she tossed the thief a leather bound book of bodacious proportions. The cover read, SECRETS. "That should satisfy the old crone," the willowy wahine of ever more obscure pseudonyms announced.

There was no doubt in anyone's mind. It was time for the scene to end.

So without delay the thief headed out the door, but as he walked across the clearing he heard the... ah... um... er... the femme de fatale call after him one final time, “If you ever change your mind, you know where I am,” but the thief did not bother to turn around. He knew the dramatic sight of her posing playfully in the doorway, as her profile was proffered one final time in vision obscuring backlight would be too much for either him... or the editors.

#

Whew! Two scenes done with two to go: this was taking longer than the thief had anticipated. Even though he knew the old crone was waiting for him back at the bar to wrap this tale up, it was time to make a side trip to her house.

Perhaps it was obvious. Perhaps it was predictable. But he was a thief, and it was what thieves do after all. At 347 he would have expected the old crone to have read a book or two. I mean, if you’re going to live in a storybook world, you should pick up a short story anthology, subscribe to a magazine, and do some research. You know, take an interest in your own plot development.

Self righteous rant aside, the thief proceeded slowly as he opened the squeaky door to the old crone’s cottage. He knew he shouldn’t have been surprised, but he was. The inside of her hut was knee deep in garbage. It looked like she hadn’t taken out the trash in fifty years, maybe more. It stunk. It reeked. The thief observed that it was probably the best theft deterrent system he had come across in a long, long time.

There were no fake jewels here. No diamonds. No rubies. Just junk. Pure and simple. The old fast food wrappers were piled knee high. A decade worth of dishes waited in the sink to be washed, and the litter box didn’t look like it had ever been cleaned.

The thief opened the same cabinet in the old crone’s kitchen that Glenda -- the magnificent moll of many names -- had taken

him to in her hut of a castle... or was that, castle of a hut? No matter. The thief peered inside the pantry and looked around. He held up the first can that he came to. It was a dented, rusted out can covered in cobwebs. Helpfully, the thief brushed away a thick layer of grime so the readers could, well, read label more clearly. No one was surprised when they saw that it read VIRGINITY.

What was it with these old crones?

The thief put the can back on the shelf. He didn't need an editor to tell him to know stealing that particular item was wrong. And then he saw it. There it was, all bright and shiny. It was just the thing he was looking for. The thief put the can in his pocket being sure not to show the label to anyone; and then, he hurried quickly back to the tavern. He didn't want to be late for the exciting, pun filled conclusion to his own story.

#####

The old crone had been drinking. It was the only reason that she could think of as to why she would feel the throb in her heart when she noticed the thief's return. He wasn't much to look at: dirty clothes, unkempt hair, hadn't even had a decent bath since... but he'd probably would clean up nicely.

The old crone shook her head. Clearly she was drunk.

The thief squeezed into the booth next to the old crone as he tossed the book of SECRETS onto the table.

"You stole this for me?" the old crone beamed.

"Not exactly," the thief admitted.

The old crone eyed him suspiciously. Oh, who was she kidding, the rascal.

"Glenda gave it to me."

"WHAT?"

"Yeah. She knew I was coming and just gave it to me. Seems like she wants to end this senseless feud."

"She what?"

At that moment the thief reached over and brushed a stray strand of hair out of the old crone's eyes.

“What the hell...”

“Am I doing?” the thief said as he finished her sentence. “Isn't it obvious? I'm stealing your lines.”

The old crone fumed, “No you dolt...”

The thief interrupted her again, “It's OK. I know that if Glenda gave me her secrets they're useless. If someone gives them to you, they're not really secrets.”

“Exactly,” but wait! Did he just steal her thunder? What was happening? This wasn't how the adventure was supposed to end. She'd done all the research. Read all the relevant stories. She was finally going to get revenge on Glenda for winning that bake sale centuries ago. It was a matter of honor, but then... sitting here, next to this rugged rogue, this dashing.... “What have you done to me?” the old crone demanded to know, as she grew more flustered by the moment.

Predictably, the thief leaned over and stole a kiss.

The old crone smiled. She giggled. She screamed in frustration, “STOP IT!”

The thief held the old crone tight as he showed her the gleaming golden can he had stolen from her. It was her HEART.

“Still. A heart can be broken, if it's tricked,” the old crone warned as she punctuated the last word carefully as she laced it with warning.

The thief held her tight. The old crone giggled like a schoolgirl on her first date as the thief licked her ear and whispered, “We could always go back to your place and break open that other can.”

She lowered her eyes demurely. “You mean...”

He traced circles around her thigh, “A little magic, a little oil... open a can here, open a can there...”

“And I beat Glenda by a whole century.”

“Exactly darling,” and with that the old crone gave herself to the thief fully.

#####

It wasn't over yet though. He was a thief, and a rascally one at that. And truth be told, anyone who had read the title at the start would have known, the tale wouldn't be all the way over until the very end when thief had stolen the last _____.