

## **For the Good of Bedeckt**

**By Audrey Drennen**

In the days of yore, when kings still ruled from stone fortresses, there was a vast, flourishing kingdom called Bedeckt. Indeed it was a prosperous city, for the grain fields always yielded a plentiful harvest, there was neither fighting nor bitterness among the people, and sickness was a thing entirely unknown. This unearthly place was surrounded by high walls of granite, and indeed, unearthly it was, for Adversity with her sinister face never dared to pass through these walls. Neither, however, did Joy. No person went in; and no person came out. Everything and everyone in Bedeckt was constant, like the grey sky hanging over it. But none knew it was grey, for they did not know what grey was, and had never seen the sun. They had no knowledge that the chalky, thin grain porridge they ate lacked flavor; the garments they wore, brilliancy; the events they held, enjoyment. Peoples of the surrounding countries were baffled by and frightened of the stagnant essence behind the granite walls, and never mentioned its name for fear of its mystery.

One day in Bedeckt, a boy who was still quite small was walking about in one of the kingdom's many grain fields. He now looked behind him as he walked. He saw the castle, surrounded by carefully plotted dwellings and extensive grain fields, growing smaller as he wandered further away from it. Then, turning his head in front of him, he uttered a small cry of surprise as the city wall was now an arm's length in front of him. Within the wall was a rugged hole just his size. With a quick look behind him, and his heart beating fast, he pushed himself through the thick wall.

"Where am I?" the boy wondered, a little frightened. He found himself in the midst of knotted and twisting trees, so closely packed that he could not see through them. At first he did not recognize them as trees, they were so different from the scanty handful of thin, straight trunks on the other side of the wall. When he looked up he perceived that the sky was strangely bright. A gust of wind brushed his face, and he would have stepped back in fear were it not for a strange captivation and longing which took hold of him.

"Who are you, my dear child, and where did you come from?" Hannes started back in surprise when he realized that the voice was coming from an unknown creature. He tripped over a jutting rock and gashed his knee.

"Ooooo!" he exclaimed as he felt pain for the first time in his life. "M-my name is Hannes. And I came through a hole in the wall—and I don't know what's happening to me—and...who and *what* are you—?"

The animal, who was a doe, smiled and spoke gently, "I think humans call our kind deer, but my name is Gretel. You need not be frightened. I know that you are of Bedeckt, and therefore must be unused to our kind." With a sigh she said, "We creatures used to dwell in those regions many years ago. But there were no walls then." To Hannes' surprise her large eyes sparkled, and as a clear liquid trickled down her muzzle, he felt a warm glow in his chest. She licked his wound clean and immediately his pain subsided.

"Come with me," the deer said, "and I will give you a gift."

"A gift? Pray, what is a *gift*?" Hannes inquired.

She only laughed softly and said, "You will soon see." After walking for a small distance they came upon a golden tree with blushing fruit. "Eat," Gretel said, and motioned towards the tree. Hannes, doubtful at first, reached up to the lowest branch and plucked a peach from it. It felt soft in his hands and a sweet odor filled the air. Hannes bit into it; and he was delighted for the first time.

Many years had passed, and Hannes was now a lad. As he was scything in the grain fields one day, he saw his mother hastening toward him.

"Hannes, I have satisfactory news," she told him. "You have been selected to serve as a paige to one of the Scarlet Knights. King Fabian has recognized that you serve him well. You have been selected to serve, for the good of Bedeckt, Hannes."

"I am honored, my Mother," said Hannes, "I am proud that I have worked for the good of Bedeckt so far, and hope to continue to do so." Hannes anticipated the moment when he would stand before King Fabian and accept this great honor. For, the greatest desire of all the people of Bedeckt was to act towards the benefit of their kingdom and King Fabian. There were many ways to do this, but the first born son and daughter of every family always served by becoming a Scarlet Knight or White Dame. It was known to all of the people that these persons had the important job of sacrifice, and they were referred to as "the Sacrificers." Their honorable deeds, however, were unknown to all the boys and girls until they came of age. Hannes, now being of about twelve years, would soon learn the duties of his new position.

After Hannes had been in the service of the Scarlet Knights for some years, one of the knights gave him a message to deliver to King Fabian. As Hannes was returning to headquarters after completing this errand, he heard a strange chanting coming from a nearby room. He peeped through a slightly opened door and beheld a group of pale young women, all dressed in white, chanting a mournful lullaby. Some sewed deep-colored garments at a long table, others lied prostrate on white beds, drained and dying, as it seemed, with arms outstretched. As he

looked closer, he noticed the garments which some of the women stitched were stained as they worked; the Dames pricked themselves with their needles, emitting dark liquid which seeped into the cloth. Hannes caught his breath as he recognized that this liquid was of the same color of that which had appeared on the gash on his knee many years ago. But at that time, someone had been there to lick it clean. No one saved these poor women now.

“Why do they inflict such things upon themselves?” he wondered. “Do they not feel that same thing that I did on my knee? *These* cannot be the heroic White Dames whose deeds I have heard praised so often!” And he saw one of the Dames on the beds draw a deep and final breath. Suddenly he turned away from the sight and hurried back towards headquarters, deeply perturbed.

When he had arrived at headquarters he saw two knights preparing for the sacrificial ceremony by donning their armor. He approached one of them and asked him,

“Is this what I have been waiting to witness? Will the sacrifice take place now?”

“Yes, Hannes, we will joust until we both fall and our hearts stop their beat. This is the moment I have been waiting for all of my life.”

Hannes, even more dismayed than before, protested, “That is what you and all of the others have been preparing for? What I will soon take part in? How could you consent to do such a worthless thing!”

“For the good of Bedeckt, Hannes, for the good of Bedeckt,” the Scarlet Knight droned on. “Why should you question the necessity of obedience? We are bound by duty to King Fabian to dedicate our lives to death, and that is what we live for.” Hannes watched horrified as both Sacrificers mounted their horses, took hold of their bronze-tipped spears, rode forward, and drove them into each other. They fell to the ground, with no resistance to the dark mist closing over their eyes, and their blood fell in pools, soaking the ground where they lay.

Hannes had seen more than enough. He ran, blindly and unaware of his direction; he kept running away, away from that horrid sight. Suddenly he came upon the city wall, and he saw with surprise a familiar hole. Desperately he pushed himself through it, and once he was on the other side of the wall he sunk down on his knees and felt a warm liquid stream down his cheeks. As he removed his hands from his face he saw that they sparkled, like the Doe’s eyes had done when liquid ran from her eyes. Looking around him, he saw the clear color of the sky, the gnarled trees, and even the same stone over which he had tripped years ago.

“Why do you weep?” Hannes looked and saw a small animal of the same color of the Dames’ pale gowns, but of a warmer and more wooly texture.

“I have no purpose, for there is only death in the end. There is nothing to live for,” Hannes told him.

The little creature, who was a lamb, replied, “Oh yes, there is something to live for. Only you do not know it because you witnessed false sacrifice. There is love to live for, which is enabled by true sacrifice. Come with me and I’ll give you a gift.” The Lamb led him to a large tree, where a large owl with brilliant, knowing eyes sat sedately. “I hope you find your purpose, young man. This creature will counsel you in his wisdom. Goodbye,” said the Lamb. Hannes returned a thankful smile to the Lamb, who then departed. Then he turned to face the strange feathered creature, and feeling his piercing gaze, Hannes cast his eyes down.

“Be not afraid, my son. I know your troubles, for I was there the day the spell was cast.”

“Spell?” Hannes asked him wonderingly. “What is a spell?”

“A covering, a deception, and a curse. You are right, Hannes, to feel disturbed by this spell, for it was cast by King Fabian, who is really a wicked sorcerer named Betrüger. You see, many, many years ago, this sorcerer decided that he would create a way to avoid pain and suffering. So he cast a spell over Bedeckt that caused everything and everyone to work together without having to encounter suffering. But by cloaking suffering he deprived the kingdom of joy. The sacrificing rituals of the White Dames and Scarlet Knights that you witnessed are what keeps the spell going. So you see, Betrüger and the people he lulled to sleep let the suffering in this world grow by avoiding it rather than facing it.”

“But how did you know my name and my past experiences?” Hannes wondered.

“Well, my child,” the wise Owl said as he chuckled softly, “There is another powerful force besides evil in this world, though it be fewer and farther between. I have chosen the side of the Good, and therefore can know things that fiends like Betrüger do not.”

Hannes sighed, and said, “I do not know what to do, know that I know that this spell exists. What at all can I do, a weak boy like me?”

“You can do much, Hannes. You can break the spell. But remember it will take true sacrifice.”

“I do not wish to sacrifice myself like those miserable Knights and Dames! What will come of it?”

“Oh but Hannes, the difference is, like my friend the lamb told you, that one brings everlasting death, the other everlasting life. You of course may choose not to break the spell, but if a window has been opened to you, why not do the same for others?”

Hannes struggled silently, and said finally, “Yes. I will do it. For the good of Bedeckt, I will do it.”

“You have chosen well, Hannes. Only remember that it will take true sacrifice.”

So it was that Hannes returned within the city wall which held the spell, and set out to break it. He approached the foreboding grey castle, struggling with himself each step of the way, feeling the weight of doubt in his heart. “Can I do this, and will I fail?” He kept asking himself.

He entered the castle and climbed a winding staircase of forty-hundred steps to the false King’s secret rooms. He was so weary by the time reached the last hundred, he almost fell down with exhaustion. But the sound of heavy shoes and swishing robes on the stairs below him caused him to struggle onward with great speed, though each step seemed like twenty. Finally, with chest heaving, he reached the top of the stairs and shoved open the heavy door of the room at the top. Sounds of rushing footsteps drew nearer, and Hannes nervously rushed to the center of the room where there sat a great box, covered with ages-worth of dust. He tried to pry it open with every effort, but it would not give.

“I must break the spell, I must break the spell!” he kept muttering to himself. “Oww! Oh, help!” he shouted as the metal latch of the box cut his hands. The approaching steps had reached the door, and someone was opening it.

But by the time evil *Betrüger* had opened it, the box had burst open with Hannes’ last effort. A gust swept through the room; suddenly the sun and rain both came forth from behind the sky’s grey shroud. *Betrüger* started to shake, and Hannes watched as he aged one thousand years in moments.

“The spell is—the spell is—*broken!*” *Betrüger* shrieked, and immediately crumbled to dust.

And Hannes, leaning against the window with relief, saw the walls come crashing down.

“I have saved Bedeckt,” he said breathlessly, “for the good of Bedeckt—I have sacrificed.” And ever after, Hannes and the people of Bedeckt lived happily, the sun never hiding its brilliant face behind a cloud again.