

An Elvish Sword of Great Antiquity

by Jim Aikin

Jim Aikin hangs out on message boards for authors and devotees of text-based games. (He has written a few, including “Lydia’s Heart,” which is available for free download at www.musicwords.net.) During some discussion, the title of this story came up—how many of you recognize it? If you played computer games in the 1980s, you probably do. Inspiration being what it is, Mr. Aikin took the line and ran with it, creating something completely unrelated to the source.

By the way, this story marks the second time this particular Elvish sword has appeared in an *F&SF* story—check the July 2001 issue if you want to find the previous instance. But first, here’s a new story for your enjoyment—

Hanging on the wall above the trophy case was an elvish sword of great antiquity. During dinner my eye was drawn to it again and again, so that I fear I was somewhat inattentive to the conversation that flowed around me. We were nearly a dozen—Portnoy James, our host, and his charming daughter Patricia; Mimi Selkirk the celebrated actress; the industrialist Rupert Savage and his wife; Bishop Choat; and three or four others whose names, I am sad to say, I no longer recall. James’s dining room was paneled in dark oak, which had been rubbed to a high gloss, and a fire had been laid on account of the chilly November weather. The firelight danced across the blade of the sword, rendering it in shifting shades of red and gold.

The sword was small, suited to an elvish hand, and had a hilt of fine silverwork. From my seat at the dining table I could see that its blade was incised with runes, but I was too far away to read them. I say that it was “of great antiquity” because I subsequently got a closer look at the runes, when the sword was passed from hand to hand around the table.

The servants moved in and out noiselessly, replenishing our wineglasses at need, bringing the soup and the meat and later the dessert. Silverware clanked, and I can still hear Miss Selkirk’s warm peal of laughter as if it were a sable fur draped across my arm. Miss Patricia James was rather starstruck by Miss Selkirk, and lost no opportunity to draw her out on the subject of her numerous successes and the male film stars with whom her name had been linked in the popular press. I believe the bishop may have snorted audibly at one or two points during this discourse. Rupert Savage, a large man with a heavy jaw, merely chomped; his wife tittered, and drank more wine than perhaps she should have.

As James stirred sugar into his coffee, he turned to me. “You seem

quite taken by my sword.”

“It’s a curious piece,” I said. “Elvish, by its look.”

“Indubitably. We had a warren of them down by the river—a regular hive. After it burnt to the ground, I spotted this one day while riding through the rubble. Evidently they had left it behind when they fled. Not surprising. Elves are often careless.”

“Your own servants seem quite punctilious.” I gestured at the silent, black-clad elf who was at that moment tilting a crystal decanter to fill Mrs. Savage’s wineglass. The decanter was large, and the elf was small; he had to hoist it in both hands practically over his head to pour; yet never a drop spilled.

“They’d better be. They know the consequences. One lad I had to horsewhip. Made a thorough mess out of polishing my best boots. I had to get new ones.”

Bishop Choat cleared his throat. “Had a man once beg me to baptize an elf,” he said. “Couldn’t do it, of course. They have no souls, elves. Our Savior’s irrelevant to them, as there’s nothing there to save.”

“Oh, but surely elves have contributed so much to our popular culture,” Miss Selkirk said. “Their wonderful songs, the famous elfin code of honor—to say nothing of the fine needlework!”

“Elf honor’s naught but pagan rubbish,” the bishop said. “You won’t find it in the Bible, I can promise you. And the pointy-eared devils ignore it when it suits them to, which is most of the time. They kill their own babies, did you know that, if they even suspect the father’s human? Won’t raise a half-breed child, for all it would improve the bloodline.”

James pushed back his chair and rose. “Would you like to see the sword?” Without waiting for an answer, he strode to the trophy case and took it down. He brought it to the table holding it horizontally in both hands, with the blade flat against the flesh of his fingers. It glinted brighter in the firelight than before, except where his shadow fell across it.

He held it out to the man on his right, who took it and brandished it experimentally, feinting at the nearest candle. “Feels like a toy. Looks sharp enough, though.” He passed it on to Patricia James, who took it nervously and passed it hurriedly to Miss Selkirk.

While Miss Selkirk was inspecting the workmanship, I had an opportunity to glance at the runes. They were in an archaic style, as I knew from having taken a course in comparative linguistics while at Oxford. Thus I inferred that the sword was not newly wrought, but a relic of some earlier age. I saw the rune for “king’s hand,” the one for “unerring flight,” and the one for “violence turned,” which is often mistranslated “vengeance.” Some of the others were unfamiliar to me, but while I would not have attempted a faithful translation, the purport was appallingly clear.

Miss Selkirk attempted to hand the sword to me, but I put my hands in my lap, and would not take it. She raised a glamorous eyebrow at me. “I’d rather not,” I said lamely. “Forgive me, but I have an unreasoning horror of weapons of any sort.”

Portnoy James’s laugh boomed out across the dining room. “Squeamish, eh? Wonder how you shave.”

I touched the smoothness of my cheek. “I manage,” I said.

“A week in the country’ll put the steel in your backbone,” James went on. “Tomorrow we’ll be up early and shoot some grouse. You’ll love it.”

Miss Selkirk made a delicate moue of distaste, but her eyes twinkled, as if to say, “Men! What else can you expect?” Rupert Savage, on my other side, grunted. He pushed back his chair with a heavy scrape; its rear legs caught on the carpet, and the dining table shuddered so that the candles swayed. He stepped behind my back and grabbed the sword where Miss Selkirk had laid it on the table. “Not much use against a repeating rifle,” he said, swinging it casually in the air. “Is it true elves won’t use firearms?”

Not long after, I excused myself to wash my hands. As I was passing down the long hall between the dining room and the library, one of James’s servants stepped out of the shadows. It was not, I think, one of those who had waited table at dinner, but they were none of them known to me. He had the long narrow face and slanted eyes of the Irish elves, and tufts of white hair as fine as down grew from the tall tips of his ears. “You should not linger here tonight,” he said softly, and passed on.

I considered the matter gravely while studying my face in the bathroom mirror. I may have trembled a little; when I combed my hair, I believe my comb fell into the basin. On returning to the dining room, I made effusive apologies to our host. Pressing business in the city, a busy week ahead, certainly not a reflection on the charming company (with courteous bows to Miss Selkirk, Miss James, Mrs. Savage, and the other ladies), and

so forth. All of the ladies, I may say, had handled the sword as it was passed around the table, some of them gingerly and others with evident relish. As I wrapped myself in coat and scarf and took my leave, James had not yet hung the weapon back up in its accustomed place; it rested on the table at his elbow, like common cutlery.

The hour was already late. I started the engine of my motorcar (no small feat, in such icy weather) and drove off down to the end of the lane. There I stopped, and switched off the headlamps and engine. I wrapped myself in a heavy lap rug; while I did not much fear for my safety, I saw no reason to risk catching a chill.

Several hours passed. At one point I thought I saw three or four small black-clad figures slipping through the trees, moving down the lane away from the house, but the moonlight was fitful; I could not be certain my eyes weren't playing tricks on me.

Along toward 2:30 in the morning by my watch, the still of the night air was pierced by a long and hideous scream, which came from the direction of the house. I waited, wondering if the scream would be repeated.

I suppose I might at length have climbed out of the car and gone back up to peer in the windows of the house, in order to bear witness to what had transpired, but the need to do so was taken from me. No more than a minute had passed since the scream, when a white-clad figure rushed down the lane. It was Patricia James, her face contorted by terror, the long loose nightgown billowing out behind her as she ran.

She saw my motorcar and veered toward me. "Thank God," she cried. "Father, and the bishop, they're all—that hideous—you must save me!" She gripped the side of the car in a hand whose bones stood out beneath the skin as stiff as a claw.

No sooner had the words escaped her lips than I saw her nemesis plunging toward us. The moon had emerged from behind a cloud, and the blade of the sword flickered with silvery radiance as it flew swift as an arrow beneath the skeletal boughs of the trees. Perhaps she heard the thin whistle it made as it sliced the air, or perhaps something in my face hinted at what was to come, for her eyes opened wider just for a moment.

The sword thudded into her body from behind, so forcefully that its tip emerged through her breastbone. It poked the fabric of the nightgown into a new little peak, higher than her breasts. Her mouth opened and blood gushed forth. As she fell to the ground, her head struck the running board

with a heavy thump.

The sword wrenched itself from her body. Twice more it plunged into her, just as viciously, guided by no hand that I could see. Then it rose into the air, twirled, and flew back toward the house.

I started the engine once more and drove off toward town.

The newspapers were full of the story for days afterward—how the groundskeeper had come up the lane at daybreak and found Miss James lying butchered in an ice-crusting pool of frozen blood. Tyre tracks led to the main road, and vanished; as they were of a common tread, not even Sherlock Holmes could have traced them any farther. Within the house the groundskeeper found the entire party slaughtered. James's head had been cut clean off, and Miss Selkirk was mutilated most horribly. The bishop—well, some things are best left unsaid. The servants had vanished, as elves will, and inevitably the blame for the tragedy was placed squarely upon them.

The newspaper accounts said nothing, however, of the weapon that was used; nor was I able to find any mention of an elvish sword being found at the scene. I should have been very surprised if there had been.

The bishop was quite wrong on one point, though I forbore to correct him at the time: It is not true that the elves always kill half-breed babies born of elf-maidens who have been raped. Some of us are so loved by our mothers that they cannot bear to part with us, no matter how painfully our rounded ears and gross stature must remind them daily of the infinitude of wrongs done them.