

L O R A
J O N E S



G L O R I O U S
S U M M E R

a short story

Glorious Summer

a short story

based on true events

*“True hope is swift, and flies with swallow's wings;
Kings it makes gods, and meaner creatures kings.”
- Richard III, Act 5, Scene 2. William Shakespeare.*

The Blue Boar Inn, Leicester, England

21st August 1485

Down in the main hall a fire is raging, despite the warmth of the season and the early hour of the evening. The vast table-board before the flames is about to be spread with the first courses of food. A man is heading there now, to join the feast. It cannot begin without him.

Accompanied by his attendant, the man makes his way from his chamber on the first floor; the finest the inn could provide. He descends the wooden stairs that fold around the outside walls of the building and enters at the rear; a less conspicuous route for someone in his position than coming via the main doors. Even though it is still light outside, the passageway the man finds himself in is dark as the grave. No candles have been lit here.

The man moves towards the doorway of the banqueting hall, obscured as it is by thick woollen drapes. His attendant holds out a hand, to move the heavy fabric aside and allow him to enter, but the man stays him.

‘No. You go on. I shall join you presently.’

The attendant opens his mouth to object but, recognising the words as an order, goes inside.

The man is left alone in the passageway. A strange thing, as he is so rarely alone. Through the gloom, he can just make out the wall timbers arcing upwards, the beams crossing over his head like branches. He takes a breath. He does not think he can go in,

imagines he has taken root where he stands, as the timbers surrounding him would once have done.

He knows what will await beyond the curtain. A chair will have been provided for him and, like his chamber, it will be the grandest the inn could find. Pouches of down-filled velvet will have been laid across it especially for his comfort. But it will be a high-backed, boxy construction, narrowing at the top. More of a coffin than a place to sit and break bread. It will be far from easy for him to shift the peculiar angle of his shoulders between its uprights, and he will have to mask the awkwardness of this motion and pretend it does not pain him, as he has had to do ever since he can remember.

The servant will come then with the bowl, and the ewerer after him, and the servant will wash his hands and pile food onto his trencher. Ground meat in a spiced wine sauce, seasoned pork and breadcrumbs, judging by the smell already wafting from the courtyard. A supper of wine and bread. For how many of them dining in that hall will this be the last food that passes their lips? Many of them will have had the same thought: they will divide over the course of the evening to come; the man has seen the same thing happen on other battle's eves. Some will be animated, lips greased with meat, gesturing boisterously with their drinking vessels and sloshing wine to the floor-stones like splashed blood. Others will sit subdued, stilled. Chewing as effortfully as though the tender cheeks of the pig they dine on are desiccated as leather, terrified at what may lie ahead.

The man considers: the sun will be up in less than twelve hours. What will happen then? The usurper and his army will be defeated, by God's grace, of that he must have faith. Yet he feels his stomach turn. And then another thought crowds his mind, so large and so terrible he fears it in danger of splitting his skull. It overwhelms him, a sensation he has not been able to escape or suppress for the past two years, no matter how hard he has tried. He is ashamed of the things he has done, appalled by them. He is ashamed of those times he has felt the swell of power low inside of him, inciting him to acts no just man would have performed. And that one deed in particular. He can see, even now, clear as day, the faces of those boys. The memory of them cracks his conscience in two. What if there is no time to atone? He is in his thirty-third year and already he can hear his time draining like sand. He shivers. How can it be so cold in the building?

The man takes a step nearer to the drapes, close enough that he can smell the fustiness rising from the wool. He is like a player, waiting to make his entrance onto the

stage. Movement inside the hall billows the material toward him slightly. Two men have been conversing on the other side of it for some time, and now their talk turns over.

‘Early in the troubles, you say?’ the first one asks.

‘Aye,’ the second replies. ‘Decades past.’ His voice, slow-paced with its West Country burr, is instantly recognisable from court. He has been thick with the Privy Council for decades. He is one of the old guard, a stalwart of the battlefields and over fifty now.

The man in the passageway steels himself to part the drapes and enter. But something about the next words that come from behind them prick his curiosity.

‘If you wish to hear the tale of our good King’s humble beginnings, I will speak it now. Never spoken it before, mind, and ne’er will after, even if God is merciful tomorrow.’ A pause. ‘I was not there *myself*, mind.’

‘Very well,’ the first says, and there is the sound of liquid being poured. ‘Then let this whet your words.’

The second man sniggers, swigs, and starts his story.

Bradley, Lincolnshire, England

1451 (thirty years earlier)

‘Have we not reached it yet?’ says Judith, blindly sweeping the air before her with outstretched hands.

‘Patience,’ replies John. ‘Only a little further.’

They have walked all the way to the woods from the village, to scuff and stumble over tree root and leaf litter.

‘Through here,’ John says. ‘Just a few steps more. Now... cease.’ They come to a halt, John’s palms still cupped at his wife’s eyes.

‘Can I see now?’ Judith asks. ‘Well?’

John kisses the top of her head and removes his hands. ‘Here.’

He has brought her to their new place, the place that they will make their own: a timbered cottage, roof-thatch sloping steeply to earth. In tales told in earlier times than this, Judith thinks, she would have opened her eyes and the cottage would have appeared in the glade before her as if conjured by faery-folk; illuminated by a vast ray of golden sunlight slicing through the tree canopy. The reality, however, is that the thatch is dense with dirt and cobwebs; parts of the plaster and daub have come away from the walls to show the fractured sticks of wattle beneath; and the door hangs off its hinges like a rotten tooth. At the side, the patch that is meant for growing vegetables is riddled with boulders and weeds hip-high, and a barrow lies abandoned next to a broken pail.

John laughs, not able to see his wife's face, yet knowing well the expression that lies across it. 'Do not worry, love, have hope. We will soon make it comfortable.'

By we, Judith knows what her husband really means is that most of this task will fall to her. That John will be too busy managing the forest for their landlord. A bird chitters somewhere above the treetops.

'A swallow!' John exclaims, craning left and right to try to see it through the budding branches. 'Tis up there somewhere, the first of the year – summer will soon be upon us!'

'Tis too early for swallows,' returns Judith. 'And summer? Well–' She frowns, knowing she has spoken too sharply, before taking her husband's hand and pulling him towards the dwelling. 'Come then, let us see what might be done.'

Over the weeks that follow, the house is fixed, swept and swabbed, the little patch of ground cleared and dug with dung. They trade timber for a pig, some fowl, a few goats. Every day, as her husband works the forest, Judith tends the fire and cooks and scrubs and sees to the livestock. She does this until her belly grows too big to wield either mop or hoe. Their child arrives not nine months after they move to the little cottage in the clearing; a boy. He is strong and healthy, born with a pelt of hair across his scalp as soft and as dark as his mother's. They name him Edward.

The boy grows and life in the woods repeats. Judith working on cottage and land, and minding little Edward while John takes his bread and his cheese and sets off into the trees. Judith thinks life will never be any different from this and surprises herself by realising she does not mind, that she is quite content with her husband and son, with the pattern of her

days. They are as the trees: there is satisfaction in their repetition, comfort and steadfastness.

But one of these days, some months after Edward's third birthday, is different. It is long past eight in the evening and John has not returned. The pottage has been bubbling on the fire for hours and Judith knows instantly, queasy with apprehension, that something is amiss. He finally reappears as the pottage dries in the cooking pot.

'What is the matter?' Judith asks, at once marking how her husband hangs his head, more wearily than she has ever seen him do so before.

He takes her hands and leads her to the stool by the fire.

'Well?'

'I am to leave,' he sighs. 'Our Lord says I must away.'

'Away?'

'To the Wars.'

'Away to the Wars?' says Judith, annoyed at her echoing of her husband's words. 'And why must you? What business is this of yours?'

'I am loyal to him, am I not? And my country? And, anyhow... ' his voice falls. 'I have no choice in the matter.'

Judith squirms on her stool and turns her face to the door. Little Edward, sensing the shift in mood between his parents, patters to his mother and takes up grubby handfuls of her skirts.

'It will not be for long, I have no doubt,' says John. He lowers himself down beside her and lays his hands over her son's hands, over hers.

'You have no such foresight,' Judith says. 'It might be years.'

'Months at most,' replies John, and Judith knows from the tone of his voice that he seeks to reassure himself as much as her. 'I will return before you so much as have the chance to mark my going.'

'Go-ing, Pa, Pa, Go-ing,' chatters Edward, looking into his father's face.

'And when I am back I will have tales to tell you, little one,' John informs his son. 'Tales of adventure!'

'Tales of barbarity, more like,' snaps Judith, before she has the chance to check her words. 'I have heard what soldiers are like, have heard what they do when their blood's up. I do not want him hearing such.'

She did not think the time would come so soon. When Judith first heard from her husband that he was to join the Wars, she found herself unable to ask when. She presumed it weeks away, months even. Yet it is only two days later when John swings his pack onto his shoulder and kisses his family farewell.

‘I will return presently, I promise.’ John kneels in front of Edward and lowers his voice to a whisper. ‘Now, young man. Let me tell you this – a white boar is said to live in these woods...’

Edward’s eyes widen. He dare not remove them from his father’s, though the braver part of him wants to cast about, in case the creature his father speaks of is edging closer to them even this minute.

His father grips his little shoulders tighter. ‘This boar is a special beast,’ John goes on, ‘a magical beast. You must not fear it. It lives here, in these woods, especially... to protect you and your mother.’ His words slow as he fights to keep them even. ‘And you must protect her too.’

Judith cannot bear it, her body has grown rigid. Her eyes fly to the sky to avoid bearing witness to her husband’s distress. ‘Do you know, I am sure there are swallows up there,’ she says, her voice strained. ‘Would I be right, do you think, have they returned?’ She drops down to where her husband kneels and meets his gaze.

‘They will always return,’ replies John and wraps his arms around his wife and son.

Judith walks with him to the end of the track to the village and it is there that they part. She knows she should walk with him as far as she can, should savour every one of these last seconds before he leaves. But she cannot.

‘Here is fine enough,’ John says, as if able to read her thoughts.

They embrace until they can do so no longer, and John starts off into the village.

‘Where going, Pa-pa,’ Edward calls to his father’s back. ‘Where going?’

The months pass. Summer browns to autumn, autumn balds to winter and Judith goes on as she always has, as she must. She works at the cottage, at the land, at raising her son. But the routine is scant comfort now, every day that goes by grinding a little more from her. She has never noticed before how dark the trees make the place, how damp. How the repetition of their trunks taunts her, reminding her of the months that have passed without her husband

and the ones that might still lie ahead. Do as he said, she implores herself, have faith. Do not lose faith that he will return. And so she continues, not knowing if John is dead or alive, waiting and waiting, becoming ever more familiar with the unique discomfort of ignorance and hope.

Judith adds a new task to her day, performing it as diligently as the rest. Every morning she walks the route she took that last time with John; through the woods and along the track, all the way to the edge of the village. Doing so has become as vital to her as the drawing of the water or the bathing of her child. She does not know how she could cope without it. One day, she has to believe that one day she will meet John as she walks. He will be making his way back to their home, and he will be bruised and thinned and sombre, but he will have returned to them at last.

It happens in early September, as Judith leads Edward down the same track to the village. Though everything looks as it always does, there is an unmistakable heaviness to the air. The woods are quieter than normal, yet this is no peaceful silence but a dreadful, oppressive stagnancy, a held breath. She sees them at the place where the trees open out onto the meadow at the track's end. Soldiers. Four in total, all on horseback.

Judith seizes Edward and spins on her heels, ducking into cover. Above the meadow, swallows swoop and gather. They twitter feverishly, littering the sky like dark arrowheads.

'Swa-oh!' exclaims Edward and thrusts a chubby finger at the birds.

'Hush,' Judith whispers, glancing anxiously at the men and breathing relief that they have not heard him. 'Let us play a game, but you must do so silently. You must not speak a word, do you understand?'

His mother's urgency quietens Edward and he nods.

'We will make our way home and, while we do, I want you to watch the forest. Look closely and you may see that white boar your father spoke of. Can you do that for me? But the animal will not show itself if you speak, remember now.'

Edward nods again and scans about him.

'Good.'

Judith determines to take a different way home. If her husband was here he would no doubt scoff at her wariness, but she wants to be quite sure the men do not catch sight of

them. They mount their horses as she lifts Edward into her arms. The beasts thunder into the trees, loam spraying from their hooves.

By the time Judith nears the safety of the cottage, all has fallen quiet. Nonetheless, when the rear of her home comes into view she stops, listens, like some fox sensing the air, tensed for danger. Their glade is still. She goes to proceed to the door at the front, rounding the side past the vegetables. Only then does she see the hoof prints that have churned the soil, the smashed, uprooted turnips scattering the earth, the destroyed bean plants and the tossed, hollowed pods, their contents emptied. By then, of course, it is too late.

‘Neigh!’ comes a noise from her breast. ‘Neigh, horsey! Horse, a horse!’ Judith’s stomach plunges. It is Edward. He has caught sight of the horses, tethered at the rim of the clearing. But before Judith can clamp a hand over her son’s mouth and pull him away again, all four men look up.

‘Now, *here* they are!’ One of them declares. ‘We were pondering where you might have gone.’

Another comes towards them, and Judith attempts to move backwards, but before she knows it yet another is behind her, clenching her upper arms.

‘Unhand me, sir,’ says Judith. ‘If you please.’ She is trying to keep her voice calm, trying to steady it for the sake of her son, so he might not get the sense, as she does even as she speaks, that the situation is about to escalate and she is powerless to stop it.

‘You have no need to resist,’ the man says, laughing, tightening his fingers so they press into her bones. ‘We only wish to sport.’

The last of them steps out from behind the others. He is young and short, his eyes set too deep and too close into his face, his lips thin. He heads towards Judith and stops before her, slowly removing a glove and extending a hand to stroke Edward’s cheek.

‘What a fine little man,’ he says to the child, with a burr of the West Country. A kind voice from a mean countenance. ‘Come, little man, do not be afraid.’

Edward looks between the soldier and his mother, unsure what is being asked of him.

The man takes off his other glove and seems, to Edward, to produce an object from thin air. It is unlike anything the child has ever seen in his life: a small, precious thing crafted of the brightest gold, so bright he imagines the man must be capable of reaching all the way past the swallows and into the sky, to draw down the sun and shrink and fashion it into the

object he now holds. It is a ring, and the top of it is even shaped like the sun, set in the middle with a smooth round stone, the same dark red as a drop of blood from a pricked finger. Edward did not imagine such things existed.

The man holds out the ring. 'If you come with me, for no more than a moment,' he promises, 'it is yours.'

Edward tries to lean out of his mother's grip and grab at the jewel, entranced. As he does, the man quickly withdraws it. 'Come,' he says, as though continuing to talk to Edward despite gesturing to the others. The soldiers advance, wresting the boy from his mother's arms.

'Put him down!' Judith cries. 'What do you want with him?'

But the man with the West Country accent does not reply. Instead, he calmly takes Edward into his arms and carries him to his horse.

The three others are standing about stupidly now and, in her rising panic, Judith realises that they are looking to the fourth, seeming to be awaiting instructions. And if not instructions, then permission, perhaps. The man who holds her son must be the one in charge, despite his youth and the roughness of his voice.

He stops, several paces away from his steed, and turns perfectly, slowly, still bearing the child. A laugh, low and dry, rumbles in his throat. His gaze passes over his comrades lazily, one by one and back again. 'Well? I know not what you are waiting for. Your blood is up well enough, is it not?'

'No, please,' cries Judith, 'please,' and as the men close in on her, Edward begins to cry.

'Do not mewl, young man,' the soldier says. 'Men do not weep.' He places the child on his horse and holds him there, but at that moment Judith makes an animal lunge forwards. The others are on her again before she can reach her son, but the commotion takes the fourth man by surprise and he spins around, losing his grip on Edward altogether.

As Judith is dragged away, the boy senses he is falling. The shock of it stops his sobs, snatches his breath and leaves him sliding, open-mouthed, from the saddle of the animal. Time stretches as Edward falls; he cannot save himself and the man nearest to him is too late to do so, too distracted by his mother. The boy feels the exact point when nothing surrounds him but air, it is the same moment something catches his eye through the trees; a flash of white, of hair and tusk; a large, four-legged animal, casting an other-worldly glow as it moves

through the undergrowth. It stops, seeming to sense it is being watched, and for the split-second before Edward hits the ground, the eyes of boy and beast are locked, soul boring into soul. Then it is over, and Edward lands, spine cracking across tree roots thick as his waist, and everything goes black.

Judith catches sight of her son's form, limp as a discarded poppet, and screams with all the power her lungs can muster, sending ragged, air-tearing cries into the trees, knowing they will be muffled by the arcing branches and go no further. She doubts they will reach the next clearing, let alone the edge of the woods, let alone the village. She is pushed forwards and hits the soil of the obliterated vegetable patch face-first, feels a hand on the back of her head, keeping it in place. Mud has splattered her face and her left eye clouds brown, but she can hear at least one of the men fumbling behind her with his belt, hear the clash of his sword dropping to the earth. She can feel hands, their savage impatience on the backs of her thighs. Then she hears and feels no more.

When Judith wakes the clearing is deserted and the sun is low, hardly any of its rays penetrating the trees. It is as though the men have taken the light with them. Judith can scarcely bear to raise her head from the mud. When she does, blood throbs behind her eyes, the pain encircling her skull. She raises a hand to her left eye, intending to wipe the mud away and clear her vision. It is sticky on her fingers and the flesh around the eye is swollen, her eyelids cemented together. As she lowers her hand, she sees the mud is crimson. Her backside and legs are cold; her skirts have been raised and left there, along with the sensation that the seat of her has been pummelled and clobbered as one might tenderise meat.

Her mind tries to play back over the events that brought her to this, her train of thought woolled and blurred. But then a memory of a being wailing in anguish assaults her mind, not her cries but her son's, the remembrance of him crying out. She attempts to stand and falls again, grazing her hand on a tree as she loses balance. Edward, she must find Edward.

'Edward! Edward!'

In her head she is shouting his name, but the only sound coming from her lips is a croak. If she cannot call him, she will find him, her husband too, she will search the cottage and circle the woods until she does. She will not stop until she finds them both.

The cottage is empty, so Judith drags her aching body through the woods, scuffing and stumbling over tree root and leaf litter until she reaches the end of the track to the village. There she collapses, her vision bleeding to blackness, head coming to rest amongst the fallen leaves. The swallows have gone, moving south for the winter. The skies and fields are quiet. There is no sign of the men and no sign of her son or her husband.

Judith's mind crawls to darkness. She needs to sleep, just for a few moments, and when she has done so she will begin her search again. And again. And again. She will keep hope, she must, but deep inside her a kernel has been planted, and she knows that, unlike the swallows, John and Edward will not return come the spring.

The Blue Boar Inn, Leicester, England

21st August 1485

'Our men were victorious then and will be at dawn. That was a glorious summer. So shall this one be!'

The man on the other side of the drapes feels the weight of these words without registering them. He thinks only that it had been a glorious summer two years previous as well, or so he had been told after the bloody deed was done. His mind cannot stop from wandering tonight, he has already forgotten the particulars of the tale he overheard just seconds before. Indeed, the single part of it that registered only did so because of the infant's name: Edward.

There seems to be no space left in his conscience for anything other than those boys, again and again his attention runs back to them. Edward was the name of the older of the brothers; the younger of them shared the same name as the man's own: Richard.

They had just been chicks, really, children when it happened; when they were held down and starved of air, their corpses tossed in a hole devised never to be found; the old cook's midden, in amongst the chicken bones.

Guilt courses the length of the man's guts and they writhe beneath his fine tunic. Why has he not been a better person? He screws his eyes shut. He had no choice, men in his position never do, and so he must not think on it. What happens tomorrow is his concern now. He must concentrate only on this. And yet, the brutality of the battlefield, in all its exposed, strength-sapping gore, is nothing to what takes place behind closed doors, in the quiet, unobserved spaces. It is in these that power corrupts absolutely. The man has understood it perfectly for years: that the deeds that come to pass under the cloak of authority are the foulest deeds of all, the deeds that sink their teeth into your soul and fester there and never let you go.

Minutes pass as he stands on that same spot in the passage, hovering at the threshold. Then the man hears the same words come once more from behind the drapery.

'Never spoken of it before and ne'er will after, even if God is merciful tomorrow. I was not there *myself*, mind. Are you sure you wish to hear it?'

The storyteller in the hall is about to share his anecdote again, but now the man in the passageway has heard enough. His damaged spine has stiffened even in the time he has spent lingering there, but still, he will stride forwards as best as he can, head held high. He will not let anybody mark the rigidity of his movements.

He finally throws apart the drapes, and as they drop closed at his twisted back, the shouts that greet him shake the building's walls, wake the swallows at roost in its topmost rafters, rouse the whole of Leicester itself.

'Long live His Majesty! Long live King Richard!'

Author's Note

The short story you've just read was inspired by the legend of the Black Lady of Bradley Woods. The tale originates in an area around four miles south-west of Grimsby in Lincolnshire, England, and is said to have taken place during the Wars of the Roses.

The wars, a series of battles for the English throne by two rival branches of the House of Plantagenet, raged between 1455 and 1487. At some point during this thirty-odd-year span, the story goes that a woodsman and his wife lived in Bradley Woods in a small, thatched cottage.

The couple had a child, a baby boy, but their happy-ever-after was thwarted by their landlord, who demanded that the woodsman join the wars, though whether on the side of the white rose of York or the red rose of Lancaster does not seem to have been recorded as part of the story. The young family said their farewells and off the woodsman went, promising he would soon be back with tales of adventure to tell his young son.

Months passed, and then years, but still the woodsman did not return. Every day his wife walked to the edge of the woods to see if there was any sign of her husband coming along the track, yet every day she saw nothing. One fateful afternoon, on her return journey to the cottage, the woman stumbled into the path of a small band of soldiers, possibly a scouting party on their way south to the city of Lincoln. Whilst one of the soldiers snatched the woman's baby away, the others raped and beat her and left her for dead. When the woman finally regained consciousness, she searched the cottage and the whole of the woods for her missing child. But she found no trace of him, and from this point on she wore only black.

As the years passed, the villagers grew suspicious and scared of the woman; a solitary, dark figure relentlessly searching the forest, increasingly wild and desperate. They stopped going anywhere near the woods. Years later, the woman died alone, having never recovered from her losses.

But people continued to see her form, moving restlessly through the trees. Locals to the Bradley Woods area have reported seeing the woman in black to this day, and it is well-known that if you venture into the woods alone on Christmas Eve night and call, "Black

lady, black lady, I've stolen your baby," three times, she will appear. Doubtless a trick to scare straying children and keep them out of the woods, but still, it seems a pretty callous chant, even to a centuries-dead woman who may not have even existed.

The original tale of the Black Lady of Bradley Woods is, like most passed down through the ages, incomplete and confusing. Why would the villagers shun the woman, a neighbour who had suffered so much? What would the soldiers want with a baby? Would the bloody heat of battle after battle in a time of ongoing civil war really spur them to such groundless barbarity? Does war harden the mind to cruelty, even in this more brutal of eras? It was this Lincolnshire tale and the questions it poses that I picked over for inspiration when I was writing my short story.

I took the imaginative liberty of making the missing baby Richard III, and it was fun to feed the clues into the narrative, and let them inform it as I went. The white boar, for example, appears on Richard III's coat of arms, and the ring described in the story can be seen on Richard's portrait in the National Portrait Gallery. You can even buy a reproduction of it. 'Horse, a horse' and the story's title, 'Glorious Summer,' are both taken from Shakespeare's famous play, Richard III.

In writing this piece of fiction, I'm not suggesting that Richard's parentage was ever in question, that he did actually kill the Princes in the Tower, or that his scoliosis – or so-called "hunchback" – was caused by physical trauma suffered in infancy; these are simply flights of fancy on my part. Hopefully they make for an interesting and entertaining story.