



As Hiram approached the bend in the road, he heard a call for help. He spurred Storm and the white steed broke into a gallop. As he rounded the bend he spotted a trio of highwaymen robbing a lone traveler.

“Help! They’re going to rob me and kill me,” the victim shouted. He was a short, portly man, clumsily brandishing a sword. He was no match for the three robbers, all tall, husky men also armed with swords, and obviously toying with the man.

Hiram drew his sword as he sped toward the scene. The robbers, upon seeing him coming, hurriedly mounted their horses and sped away.

“Cowards!” The short man shouted at them as they fled. “You haven’t the stomach to fight two of us.”

Hiram dismounted. The man came up to him, bowed, and offered his hand. “Thank you, kind sir. Those ruffians would surely have killed me. I’m Lester, merchant of Essex Village.”

“Hiram of Dare, courier for His Royal Majesty. It was a stroke of good luck that I arrived here when I did. Where might you be going?”

“I’m on my way to attend my Uncle’s funeral in Kinston. I could tell by your attire and bearing that you are a gentleman skilled in the warrior arts. No doubt those ruffians sensed it, too. I take it you are on a mission for His Majesty?”

“Nothing of vital importance. I’m delivering a necklace--a gift to the princess from her betrothed, The Duke of Edson.” Hiram unconsciously patted the leather pouch on his belt.

Lester’s eyes dropped to the pouch and lingered there for a moment. “Yes, I’ve heard of the betrothal. A fine couple. Master Hiram, you have saved my life. I have nothing to offer you but a cheap bauble. I hope that you will accept it along with my undying gratitude.”

“Your gratitude is enough. I ask no payment.”

Lester pulled a ring from his finger. “It is a tradition among my clan to show gratitude with a gift. Please. I will be dishonored if you refuse to accept it”

Hiram accepted the ring and examined it. The ring appeared to be of gold, set with a black, star-shaped onyx. Not overly valuable, he surmised, but it surely was not a “cheap bauble.” Something about the ring tugged at his memory. He puzzled over it for a moment, and then slipped the ring on his left middle finger. It fit perfectly.

He thanked the man, and soon thereafter the two men parted and went their separate ways.

In retrospect, he thought it strange that the three robbers had fled so quickly. Indeed, there seemed to be something peculiar about the



whole affair. It had been a mistake, he knew, to mention to Lester that he was carrying the duke's gift. Lester had seemed innocent, but he remembered the look in the little man's eyes when the necklace was mentioned.

And the ring still puzzled him. He was sure he had heard of such a ring before. But he soon forgot it, and his mind drifted to other thoughts.

He made it to the village of Greenwood just before dark. He found an Inn and left Storm in the stable. He arranged for a room for the night and then ordered a meal.

During the meal, his mind once again dwelled on the ring. The more he thought about it, the more he was certain that the ring was associated with something mystic, or magical. He called for ale, and a barmaid brought a tankard to his table.

"Excuse me," he said. "May I ask you a question?"

She smiled prettily as she served his ale. "Anything you wish, m'lord."

He suddenly felt self-conscious. His well tailored garb was now wrinkled and sweaty, his boots were dusty, and his normally well-trimmed beard was getting scraggly. He returned her smile. "I could think of several things. But right now I'd like to know if there is an astrologer in the village."

"We have no astrologer here," she replied, "but there is a Gypsy fortune teller, Madam Rose, who is trusted by many."

The following morning he paid a visit to Madame Rose. He showed her the ring on his finger. "Do you recognize this?" he asked.

She shrank back and gasped. "The Black Star! How did you come by this ring?"

He explained to her about his rescue of Lester, the merchant.

"The robbery was surely staged," said Madam Rose. "It was a ruse to trick you into accepting the Black Star. I have heard of four highwaymen in these parts, and it is said that their leader is a short, stout man."

"I don't understand. Why would he go to such lengths to give me the ring? Isn't the ring supposed to bring good fortune to its owner?"

She looked at him, her eyes showing pity. "I'm afraid the opposite is true. The Black Star is cursed. Whoever possesses it faces certain death. Your only hope now is to get someone else to accept it. And whoever accepts it must do so willingly. There is only one other way that

the curse will leave you. If anyone should kill you, then the killer will bring the curse upon himself.”

“Little consolation,” he said. “Either way I die.” But now he understood why Lester made certain that he accepted the ring. And he also understood Lester’s interest in the gift in his pouch. A gift from a duke to a princess would certainly be valuable--a rich prize for a highwayman.

“Someone else must have tricked Lester into accepting the ring,” he said.

“He probably gained it during a robbery, and later learned of the curse,” she said. The Gypsy went on. “You must not force the ring on anyone, and you must not cast it away. The curse will remain with you until someone willingly accepts the ring.”

“And if I can find no one who will accept it?”

“Whoever is in possession of the Black Star will die on the night that the moon is full,” she said. “The moon will be full two nights hence.”

Hiram was silent for a moment. “I’m not sure if all this is true,” he said, half to himself. “But if it is, then I will have no time to deliver the gift to the princess. The palace is four days travel from this village. If only I had time to reach the palace, the Royal Astrologer might know how to deal with this curse.”

“Even the most powerful wizards have not found a way to deal with this curse,” said the Gypsy.

“But my main concern now is to complete my mission,” he said, “and at least I may find a way to do that. The next village, Greystone, is less than two days from here, and I have a friend there that I can trust to deliver the duke’s gift.”

“Greystone is not far,” she said. “You should have time enough to make it there if you leave today. But is the gift you carry so precious that you are willing to forfeit your life? I should think that you would, above all, seek a way to rid yourself of the accursed ring.”

“Nothing comes before my service to His Majesty. And yes, the gift is valuable. Yet, if I knew of a way to rid myself of this ring and still be able to complete my assigned task, I would do it. But I fear that time is too short.”

The woman spoke low, almost in a whisper. “Perhaps there is a way. I know of a man who would deserve to possess the Black Star. There is a greedy jeweler and pawn broker in our village named Bass. He has brought misery to many because of his greed.” She lowered her

voice even more. "He probably doesn't know of the curse of the Black Star--not many people do. Tell Bass that you are desperate for a little money, and offer him the ring for one or two royal credits."

Hiram paid the Gypsy and left. As he walked out the door, he spotted a man on the opposite side of the street. The man turned his face away, but Hiram was sure he recognized him. It was one of the men who was "robbing" Lester.

Hiram followed the directions of the Gypsy to the Jeweler's shop. As he made his way along the street, he knew that he was being followed. "Lester and his ruffians are probably trying to devise a way to get their hands on the gift I carry," he thought. He chuckled to himself. "But they've a problem--not one of them would risk killing me, lest he bring the curse upon himself. They're doubtless hoping that I'll manage to get rid of the ring, and then kill me for the necklace."

The Gypsy woman's suggestion did not appeal to Hiram. He was filled with revulsion at the thought of being responsible for another's death without good cause. He knew that if he transferred the curse to another, it would be on his conscience for the rest of his life. Even the greedy jeweler.

The jeweler was a greedy, wicked man, but he probably would have siblings, parents, or perhaps a wife and children to mourn him. But Hiram wanted to make sure that the gift was delivered to the princess, and maybe he could use the jeweler's greed to help achieve that goal.

He entered the shop, showed his credentials with the king's seal, and introduced himself as a royal courier. He held out his hand, showing the ring. "Do you recognize this ring?"

"I've never seen it," said Bass, "but it is unusual."

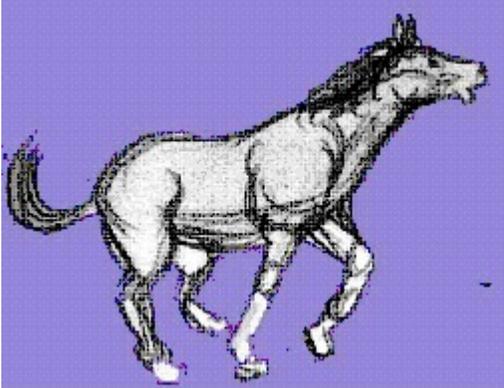
"I have come to make a bargain with you," said Hiram. He placed a ten-credit coin on the counter. The jeweler's eyes widened.

"There are more where this came from," said Hiram, "if you complete your end of the bargain, I'll see that get two more of these."

"Whatever you want...within reason."

"I want you to make a ring for me," said Hiram. He left the village early that afternoon. He knew that Lester's band hungered for the precious gift he carried. He remained alert for an ambush. He also made certain that the ring on his finger was visible, for they would not dare to make an attempt on his life as long as he possessed the ring.

He traveled through the rest of the day and all through the night, stopping only for brief rests, and to allow his horse to drink from



streams. By midday of the next day, he was weary from his journey. He dozed off several times and snapped awake expecting to find himself surrounded. But there had been no attempt to ambush him.

By late afternoon, he came upon a wooded area. He had traveled the road before, and knew that he would be nearing Greystone after passing through the woods. But these woods were thick, and tree

branches hung over the road in some stretches forming arcs. It was as he went through one of these areas that he was ambushed.

From the corner of his eye, he saw movement above him, but it was too late. A noose dropped around his body and tightened, effectively pinning his arms to his sides. He felt himself pulled up, and abruptly Lester and two of his men rushed out from hiding. One of the men slapped Storm, causing the horse to bolt, leaving Hiram dangling about four feet from the ground. Storm galloped a short distance ahead and stopped.

The fourth man jumped down from the tree, landing in front of Hiram.

“The pouch! Get the pouch, Jess,” shouted Lester. Jess reached for the pouch, but Hiram lifted his legs and kicked, hitting the big man solidly in the chest with both feet. Jess staggered back a few steps and fell. Hiram, now swinging and spinning, was trying to work his arms free. He managed to grasp the hilt of his sword with his right hand, but his arms remained pinned to his body.

While Hiram was concentrating on Jess, a second man rushed in and grabbed the spinning Hiram by the legs.

“Got him,” he shouted. “Quick, grab the pouch.” Jess rose up and immediately pulled his dagger. “I’ll kill you for kickin’ me, turd.”

Lester grabbed his arm. “You fool! He’s still wearing the ring. Do you want the curse on you?”

Jess jerked the pouch from Hiram’s belt. “Consider yourself lucky, turd.” Jess backed away and the other man released Hiram’s legs and joined his companions.

“For a Royal Courier you’re not very smart.” Lester sneered. “Trying to sell it to the jeweler was foolish.”

Jess guffawed. "I was spying on you, turd. The jeweler told me that you tried to sell it, but he knew about the curse and sent you on your way."

"Let's get out of here before he works himself loose," said Lester. The three started out in the direction of Greenwood.

"What if he trails us?" said one of the men.

"He won't follow us," said Lester. "He will be in a hurry to reach his friend in Greystone--but I doubt he'll make it in time."

As the bandits pulled away, Hiram gave a shrill whistle. Storm trotted up beside him. He threw one leg over the horse, and with a determined effort, pulled himself up and astride the animal. The noose slackened, and he threw it off.

But instead of setting out for Greystone, he stayed put and leisurely watched the four men as they were pulling away. Suddenly, he heard Lester shriek and begin cursing.

Hiram laughed. "What's the matter, Lester? Have you found something interesting in the pouch?"

"The ring!" Lester wailed. "But it can't be. You're wearing it. I saw it on your finger!"

"What you saw on my finger is an imitation, fashioned by the jeweler in Greenwood. It's merely a brass ring set with a black wooden star."

He spurred his horse and sped toward Greystone. "Farewell," he shouted. "It's not long 'til moonrise."

He glanced back to see them in pursuit. But he was rapidly putting distance between them. He knew that the nags they rode would have no chance of catching Storm.

If the four followed him to Greystone, in hopes that Lester might rid himself of the ring at the last moment, they risked being arrested. For Hiram's friend, the constable of Greystone, would have his men waiting for them.

Further, he had instructed the jeweler in Greenwood to alert the constable there to watch for the bandits. And Hiram was confident that when Lester died, the three dull-witted ruffians would be caught easily.

The necklace, the duke's gift to the princess, was now safely tucked in a secret pouch on his saddlebag.

The sky was already darkening when he rode into Greystone.

END