

Dear Editor,

Here is that story I was telling you about, from E.F. Walser's *Forgotten Folk Tales*. Owing to the peculiar rules of this library, I do not appear to be permitted to photocopy it, so I will have to copy it out by hand. My fingers are itching to 'CTRL + C'! But anyway, do with it what you will. It is called 'The Competition'. (Walser was poor on titles)...

"We gathered on the hill<sup>1</sup> for the competition. The other two kingdoms sent their armies. The Red King's men lined up on the plain, drumming their drums & waving their standards. The Green King's men marched through the valleys, their feet thrum-thrumming on the hard earth. They all loudly swore to conquer new lands, capture fine treasures, to plant many flags in the soft soils of far-flung places.

But our King, the Blue King, called only for his scribe, Baxter. Baxter arrived a bit late, his trusty chicken, Leopold, following behind. The Red King and the Green King laughed in the Blue King's face. 'See how our men are sharpening their swords, & readying their wagons for plunder,' they roared. 'How can one man possibly compete with two armies?'

Baxter took a blank notebook from his satchel. Then he plucked a feather from Leopold, who did not seem to mind, & began fashioning himself a quill.

Then the signal was given. We watched as the armies stamped their way over the horizon, their clamour & footprints lingering behind them. Some time later, when his quill was finally sharpened, Baxter ambled off, leaving just a small pile of parings. We set the sundials to a year-and-a-day.



And so it came to pass that pretty soon, there we were again, the armies returning. To the North were the Red King's army. They were battered & weary. Many were bandaged and bruised. But they emptied out bags of treasure: gold, jewels, precious lotions & rare spices, in all manner of exquisite chests & bottles. 'We have explored many lands! We have plundered many treasures! We have planted 73 flags! Victory is ours!' they said. The crowd cheered.

Then the Green King's army stepped forward. It was clear that many had not returned. Those who had were grey of skin & broken-backed. And behind them were a group of even wearier fellows, who were shackled hand & foot. The soldiers stepped forward: 'We have also explored many lands! We have enslaved many men! We have planted 142 flags! Victory should be ours!' they said. The crowd cheered once more. Then Baxter the scribe stepped forward. His boots were a little worn, & Leopold seemed a little threadbare, but both seemed in good cheer.

And in truth we were also. For we knew that gold is just dumb metal, lotion bottles run dry, & even slaves grow old. We knew that a notebook &

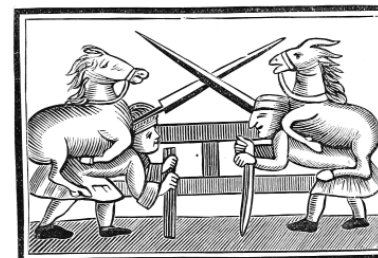
quill could truly capture things which swords and brute force could not. And oh – to find out! Had Baxter spoken to esoteric architects, & sketched their gravity-defying bridges? Had he discoursed with philosopher-rulers, & made record of their enlightened laws? Had he made study with scientists and botanists, & made sketches of their instruments, & notes of their methods? Perhaps he had discovered a new musical scale? Baxter took his notebooks from his satchel & without a word, spread them out before the Kings.

We began preparing our King's victory speech.

The blue King turned the cover on the first notebook, & perused the first page. On it, sketched expertly in ink, was a drawing of an exotic woman, entirely naked. She was wearing only a thick necklace of beads. (We surmised that the beads must have been of significance.)

On the second page there was also a drawing of an exotic woman, unencumbered by clothing. (Her necklace was smaller – however, her breasts were notably fuller.)

On the third page, the necklace did not seem to feature at all.



Page four was basically just breasts.

Page five included a gentleman figure alongside the woman. (Could we detect a likeness of Baxter himself?) He too was without any manner of clothing (though was possessed of a most impressive & slightly curved member). Page six was, in all likelihood, the same two figures (it was difficult to tell, save for the consistency in the rendering of the private parts). Pages seven, eight & nine must have presented considerable challenges in terms of perspective & steadiness of quill. Page ten appeared to be upside-down. Thereafter our King stopped reading. He cast the notebook aside & grabbed at the next one, & the next. All were the same: anatomical renderings, curves of flesh, contortions & annotations which left us feeling queasy with a strange hot rage.

Baxter stood, beaming.

'I have plundered no treasures. I have planted no flags. But sire, I think you will agree, victory is most undoubtedly mine.'

We did our duty swiftly – we marched Baxter to the gallows & hanged him. Then for good measure, we hanged Leopold, too. Then we returned to the plain, resolved to have the notebooks locked in the deepest dungeon.

But our King, the Blue King, raised his hand. We did not dare go near. The three kings were deep in some whispered conversation. It continued until late into the night. We grew uneasy, & retreated. We ate our boiled chicken nervously, worried there had been something which we were too slow to see."

- Cheers, Nick.<sup>2,3</sup>

## Notes:

1. A couple of points concerned us about Nick's letter: firstly, that we had no recollection of discussing any such story with him, and secondly, that we were able to find remarkably little information about E.F. Walser either online or in the well-stocked University of Nottingham library. However, we enjoyed the story so much that we decided to publish it regardless of its provenance. (It may be noted that another contributor to this issue has provided a set of footnotes which are similarly unverifiable; and that perhaps this holding lightly to scrupulous veracity is a part of the model of 'travelling light'. Or that fiction just gets to be fictional, no matter how deep you dig.)

2. Nick Parker tells us he lives 'on the outskirts of town', where by night he writes his short stories very, very slowly. His short story collection, *The Exploding Boy and Other Tiny Tales*, was self-published in 2011, and described by Ian Sansom in the Guardian, in a rare review of a self-publication, as 'astonishing'. By day he is a creative director at a language consultancy called The Writer. He has also published *Toast: Homage to a Superfood* (2002), a book containing over thirty recipes for making toast.

3. The illustrations here are taken from an 18th century chapbook entitled *The World Turned Upside Down or The Folly of Man, Exemplified in Twelve Comical Relations upon Uncommon Subjects*, collected by the University of Toronto Libraries and originally published in The Public Domain Review [http://publicdomainreview.org/collections/the-world-turned-upside-down-18th-century/] under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0.

Then Baxter the scribe stepped forward. His boots were a little worn, + Leopold seemed a little threadbare, but both seemed in good cheer. And in truth, we were also. For we knew that gold is just dumb metal, lotion bottles rot dry, + slaves grow old. We knew that a notebook + quill could truly capture things which swords + brut force could not. And oh - to find out! Had Baxter spoken to esoteric architects, + sketched their gravity-defying bridges? Had he discoursed with philosopher-rulers, + made record of their enlightened laws? Had he made study with scientists and botanists, + made sketches of their instruments, + notes of their methods? Perhaps he had discovered a new musical scale? Baxter took his notebooks from his satchel + without a word, spread them out before the Kings.

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