

Circle Song

At last it is finished. The womb of shining water lies quiescent now, cradled in the encircling stones. Above, on the great green down, the warrior kings lie silent in the nine barrows, their peace undisturbed.

For more than a thousand years we guarded these holy places with ritual and reverence. When the first invaders came, we made the circle invisible, hidden amongst inky trees. Camping briefly on the place between the hills, they sent scouts to the top of the Creech. But the barrow wights did their work and soon silence mantled the valley again. For another thousand years we rested. More invaders came, building a castle between the hills. Centuries passed but their church did not disturb us.

But then, the puritanical ones came. The invader's religion had quietly honoured the sacred sites, this one did not. These were hard faced men, shaven headed, muttering darkly as they cast down painted statues from the church with pikes and pickstaves whilst others whitewashed the pictures from the walls.

When they took the castle, we hoped it would suffice, but no. On May Day they came, sniffing after the maidens who slid secretly to the place of the shining womb. In the old days it was a time for rejoicing, music and song danced under the full moon. Many a child was conceived on that day. Now the celebration was furtive, banned by those sour old men who knew nothing of the joy the goddess could bring. From my place on the high down, I saw the torches come. I ran down the hill to warn the women. But it was too late. With loud cries, the men violated the sacred ground, urinating into the mother's womb. Great sticks levered the stones, toppling them. The earth shrieked.

Raising my staff, I stepped into the circle. Seeing my blue woad, they shrank back. Then fell on me. The leader, a grim grey man shrieked:

"Begone foul fiend" and thrust his torch at me.

I reached out to push it aside. Grabbing my staff from my hand, he raised his holy book and struck my arm. Torch and book united in flame. A torrent of words enmeshed me, sent me staggering from the circle into the welcoming dark.

From without, helplessly I watched as my priestess was brought, stripped naked but clothed in light. Her beloved form was beautiful to me, it should not be defiled.

"Witch" they screamed, "Devil's harlot."

One, taller and sterner than the rest, pronounced over her as he ducked her head into the pool. Surely they knew you cannot kill a woman who left her body almost three thousand years ago? When they lifted her out, she lifted her head proudly as water streamed from raven tresses toward the earth.

"Witch, burn the witch". The cry went round.

Wood was brought, fire lit. But it did not touch her. The men choked on acrid smoke, but my lady stood serene under the silver moon. Angrily, they dragged her away. With words she was banished. Bound into time. As she faded into the quiet woods, I moved towards her.

And the grey man pounced. Muttering his incantations, he forced me up the hill. But there I could call on the borrow wights for aid. Silently they hung waithlike in his path. There was no need for them to speak. He ran,

shouting back over his shoulder that he would never rest until it was settled, he would banish me, I would be gone.

For four hundred years he stood between the castle and the church. As souls were called to their maker, he blocked the gateway. This was his army, his soldiers of Christ, his to command. Grey and bitter, he did not let go. His ghostly horde importuned the villagers:

“Set us free, for the love of God, set us free.”

But no one heard. A few felt the ghostly presences, shivered and shuddered before moving on, grew ill at ease. Dis-eased. Crops withered, animals passed quickly by. The castle walls fell.

The circle was all but buried, the shining lake grown stagnant and stale. On my hill, I watched. In her wood, my lady waited. And the grey man shouted imprecations that no one heard.

With the millennium came change. People sickened and died, the visitors fell away. The village was uneasy, violence flared under the castle walls. People muttered at things glimpsed from the corner of an eye. Cats spat with fur spikes raised. Dogs rumbled low in their throats as the dismal horde pressed close. I called again to the goddess for aid.

On Midsummer’s Day the ley lines sang as though sensing a power great enough to free us. A bush on the Creech burst into flame, visible for miles. On the sacred lake ripples stirred. Was this to be the time?

Two women came. One, tall, grey haired but athletic, strode ahead. The other one, short, fat and out of condition, puffed her way up the Creech, flung upward with the aid of a force 9 gale. Cushioned in a hollow below the top, the taller one patted her pockets. Out came a pendulum and a crystal. Could it be, were they strong enough, would they see? Quietly they stood for a few moments, heads bowed, watching the pendulum swing wildly before their words rushed to me on the wind.

“Look, over by the church I can see a clergyman, grey and stern with a tall, wide brimmed black hat. He’s holding the gateway, trapping many souls. He’s the one who has been causing all the misery. And over there on the barrows, there’s a tall man dressed in blue woad. Seems like he’s keeping a wary eye on us.”

“Hardly surprising, we don’t know what to make of our ourselves most of the time.” The dumpy one laughed. “Can you open the gateway?”

“I’ve got to get past the clergyman first. Can you distract him for me?” She turned towards the church below.

The dumpy woman looked pensive for a moment and closed her eyes:

“He came with Cromwell’s men when they took the castle. He says he had a job to do but he didn’t realise it would take this long. I think he’s ready to go now and if he leaves the others can follow. Get that portal open.”

The grey haired woman twitched and shook, her mouth open on an eerie sound. Above her head, a hole whirled open stretching down towards the church. And I saw the spirits leave. A multitude rising to the portal where, from billowing light, beckoning hands reached down to help them on their way.

“We’d better leave it open for now to be sure they’ve all gone, let’s take a look at the circle, see what’s going on there.” The older woman gestured to the foot of my down.

“Imraigh, wake up, help is coming at last.” I called but my lady didn’t stir, surely she must feel this but it had been so long. Impatiently I made my way down the track towards the circle but an invisible barrier bounced me back. The grey man may have gone, but his words still had their power.

Those strange, unearthly sounds shrieked out again, echoing all around. The tall woman stood in the circle, head thrown back. The ley lines opened, power radiating out. The circle was whole once more. The barrier before me fell away.

And here was the dumpy woman smiling and reaching out her hand, come to lead me down. She was calling Imraigh too, inviting her to reclaim the circle and regain the land. My lady stirred like a tree awakening from winter slumber. From high on the hill a raven flew to her shoulder and gladly they came to my side. At my feet was my staff of power, lost in that battle long ago. The ancient jewel at its tip shone with red fire. With it and my lady, I was complete again.

Together the women poured water into the stagnant womb.

“Glastonbury water from Chalice Well,” they told us, “to bring the goddess back. See, here is her statue set up in the centre. We honour her, and you.”

When it was done and the circle sang its power again, they left.

I took Imraigh in my arms. We had a ritual to perform, a magical, sacred act that would restore potency to the land. We lay together in the mother’s womb.

All will be reborn.