

# The Tiller's Daughter

by Anna Haldane

I oft think of the old days, many hundredfold years ago, when I could still count my age in years; before the sorrowful sore loss at Hastings laid low England's pride and the Normans overthrew and warped her rightborn tongue.

A child of much callowness was I at that time. A tiller's daughter, not twelve summers old when I came to the steppe beside the brook to bathe. There, across the water, I beheld a dweorg; one of the faery-folk. Thick green-black was his hide, warted like a toad; belly round and hairy like a dúnland boar, one eye small and beady, the second wide like a wound.

The writhing, wrestling dweorg was being dragged into a quagmire by a score of bog-goblins – slimy imp-like beings, no bigger than a hand.

It broke my heart to see the helpless dweorg in this wrongful plight. I yelled at the goblins till my throat went raw. Forwards I stormed, hitting them with stones of every kind, harrying them away from the fast-flowing stream.

This dweorg, half drowned, I pulled from the filthy water. He bowed and thanked me and gave his name as Bheort. And I gave mine, Gerta.

Finding himself heavy in my debt, the dweorg found a rock on which to sit while he minded what my yield should be. Gemstones? No. A castle? No. A kingdom? No. Then what?

Let me have three wishes, said I to Bheort. For then the outcome would be mine, and if I chose ill any evil cleaved to me alone.

Bheort turned his beady eye to mine and then his other.

Very well, said he. But wishes are grown, not given. I must first plant on him a kiss. And from that kiss a wish shall sprout.

To kiss a dweorg may be thought a small care at such a time. But if you so think, you cannot have seen a dweorg before. Ill enough that Bheort's swart and warted hide oozed with a foul-smelling sticky sap, riddled here and there with bits of dead or dying flies and spiders and beetles and worms; but as you got nearer you'd see the flesh was shifting, churning, like maybe a seething sea of maggots writhed beneath.

You must mind, I was a child then: to kiss anyone unknown was frightening enough. But to kiss *this* unknown... Ugh!

By then, I'd gone too far to think again. I asked him where I should plant my kiss.

He jabbed his clawed finger at the midst of his brow, just above his eyes.

I steeled myself. I held my breath. I squeezed shut my eyes and leaned forward; down, down, down, till I thought my lips would never find their mark.

But find it they did. The warm, rippling, hairy rind met my cringing mouth.

There. The kiss was planted.

I pulled back to my full height and opened my eyes, and lo! From the same spot, a shoot of flawless crystal sprouted. At Bheort's word I plucked the dear thorn from his forehead, cradled it in my hands, and made my first wish. I prayed I might sprout gold from my hair at will. Never so pure I'd draw too many eyes. Never so much I'd be rich and rotten. Never so little I'd starve.

The thorn turned black, which is to say my wish was dealt.

Keenly I tried it out. I fastened hard my will till I felt my scalp prickle. I rummaged with fingers for the stiff strands and snapped them from my head.

There, in my hand, I clutched just enough shimmering gold to weave a pretty band, which later I would sell to a monger for food and milk and clothes.

Bheort asked if I still wanted the other wishes.

Of course I wanted them. The second kiss needed to be stamped right at the lumpiest dimple of Bheort's right cheek.

Not as unsure as before, I shut my eyes and closed my fists at my sides and leaned forward; down, down, down, and still down, till I thought the dweorg had played a game and disappeared.

But soon my lips found their sticky mark. The ghastly hide beneath swelled and warmed and squiggled.

And, there, the kiss was planted.

No sooner had the thorn sprouted, than I plucked it off and made my next wish. I wished I might be everlastingly young and fair. Never so young that I couldn't leave girlhood. Never so fair I'd be leered at and hounded. Never so ugly I wouldn't be craved.

Though the thorn wizened to black in my hands, not until the flow of many years could I tell it had worked. Indeed, the yields from this wish were better than I'd hoped. Everlasting indeed is my youth, and so too is my prettiness – if you can call it that. A thousand and more years have gone and not a day have I aged since I was twenty.

The third kiss proved both the blithest and hardest to plant. This one, Bheort insisted, must be clapped to his very lips. I say the blithest, because I was toughened by then and not, for my part, the least worried about the deed itself; the hardest because it was the grisliest deal of all.

You don't think kissing a dweorg on the lips is grisly? Perhaps you don't mind where else those lips have been, or that a dweorg's mouth is the gateway, both in and out, for all that meets that hairy belly!

Anyway, I did it. Though I quailed and almost swooned when Bheort's downy lips touched mine, quickening to my peck with a slurpingly slobbering smack of his own.

With my last kiss sprouted and plucked from his dribbling mouth, I wished I'd have some spellcraft to shape my tales. Never so much that the truth be lost forever. Never so crude that the artifice be plain. Never so little that they be fully believed.

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