

False Readings



Patrick Stuart



Lost Pages

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Patrick Stuart

a Lost Pages book



Extranumero Issue

First Edition – November 23, 2015

Cover Illustrations by Scrap Princess

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Story 3

Knights Of The Snail

Knights of the Snail began when Matthew Adams drew a knight riding a snail as an OSR logo. I liked it so much that I came up with the names of twenty Snail Knights, along with various treasures, secrets and madnesses to go with them. Then as I was reading Malory's "Morte", it must have seeped into me somehow and I couldn't stop thinking about them. The resulting stories are a mixture of me, Matthews art and Malory's mood. Eventually we hope to complete all twenty and release them as an illustrated book. (If the story makes you sad, remember it is not over yet. In fact, it has barely begun.)

The Queen was dead and the King of the Curlicue throne was sad.

All day he slept and wept and, as the sun fell through the empty air towards the terminating line of night, he woke and pushed away his salt-encrusted sheets and walked to the balconies deepening void to stare into the dying summer light, while the Fool, Ham Floret waited in his shadow tensing his legs to leap in case the king should try to jump.

The King did not jump. He simply looked into the gathering gloom, counting the drawn storms as they marched across the velvet horizon and the sun bled red across the land.

No-one saw the Kings face as he stared into the dark, or made out the half-whispered words that fell from his mouth like dry leaves, they only heard the scratching of the monarchs nails on the old oak of the balconies lip.

The King stood through the night on the border of the lightless room. No-one looked up but everyone below him knew that he was there. No-one could see him clearly in the dark but

the Fool Ham Floret could trace his immoveable outline against the stars behind the parting clouds, which he was very glad of as it showed the King had still not jumped.

This went on for several days, then several months, then several years.

Ham Florets legs began to cramp.

“This is quite enough.” He thought and, technically committing treason, he stole the kings spiralling seal and summoned the Knights of the Snail.

Slowly, and by spiral paths, the Snail Knights came.

First arrived Sir Bird Spiralling, perhaps the greatest of the knights, who looked oddly at the ink-stained fingers of the Fool, yet did not speak. Then Sir Chesslike Hand upon his snail of gold. Sir Babbling of Bronborough came next, Sir Twine Devise, Sir Lucent Void and then Sir Duno Chrime came carefully and slow upon his many-cushioned snail.

Then quickly came a row of seven snails. Sir Tangling Chase, Sir Bedlam Frail, Sir Furnace of Furness, Sir Rime Grotesque, Sir Tumble-The-Tin Perchance, Sir Lightly Gloom and last of these, sitting thinking on his snail, was Sir Coagulate Fast, the wisest of the knights some said.

Last appeared sir Voretz Frail, Sir Max Bassoon and finally in tumult came Sir Whirl.

“I am here!” Cried Sir Whirl. “I have raced the very wind in my attempt. Am I the first?”

“In fact you are the last,” said the Fool Ham Floret, “you could not be more late.”

“In fact of fact,” said Vortex Frail, “the last you cannot be, for Sir Sextant Wrought the Permanently Lost is neither here nor there.”

“I believe,” said Duno Chrime, “I saw him on the way, yet ere night fell I lost him in the dark and never a sight of his snail have I seen since.”

Then spoke Sir Fast, the Thinking Knight, and though he did not raise his head the room grew quiet.

“You all forget,” he said in his still and level voice, “Sir Gorget Vile.”

“The Black Snail Knight!” Cried Max Bassoon. “Tis well for him he did not come, for who here has not learned to hate by word or deed that honourless and crafty rogue. No Knight is he say I!”

Few there hesitated to agree.

"Yet," said Sir Bird Spiralling, "he is a knight, The King who knighted him has knighted us."

"The King!" said Twine Devise, "Where is the King? He summoned me direct."

"And I!" cried Sir Whirl.

"And I!" went on Sir Tangling Chase.

"And I! And I!" Cried every Knight, and they waved their summons in the air until it seemed as if a great affray of paper might take place. Except Sir Fast who sat silently with his chin upon his fist, and Sir Bird Spiralling who looked suspiciously at Ham Floret.

"The King," said Sir Bird Spiralling "is the only one in all the land who may command by speech or written word the Wondrous Knights of the Snail. At his request we stand ready to attempt any adventure. Yet here we come and find no King but you instead."

"A regrettable deception" said Ham Floret massaging his thighs.

"Treason!" Cried Sir Whirl and picked the Fool up by his feet, whirling him around to bash his brains out on the shelf.

"Pro Patria!" cried Ham Floret, "Excessive love of country!", though he had to shout it several time as Sir Whirl built up centrifugal speed and the exact division of his words was hard to place.

"Stop." said Sir Bird Spiralling, "release the fool. And not" he quickly added "not straight away Sir Whirl, but first reduce his speed and bring him to a relative stop and only then let go."

"As you wish." sighed Sir Whirl in disappointment.

"I can explain" said Ham Floret after his dizziness had calmed. "The King is sad. In the day he sleeps and weeps and as the sun goes down he puts aside his salt encrusted sheets and walks to stare into the darkness left by the falling sun and count the storms on the velvet horizon."

"Will he jump?" Asked Max Bassoon.

"He has not yet" replied the Fool "but I am prepared to catch him if he does. He simply waits and watches the dark speaking quietly and scratching the wood of the rail. Then, as morning comes, he returns to his bed to sleep. In the afternoons as his eyes twitch under their lids, I sneak berries into his murmuring mouth and he eats them without waking up and so he has not starved to death."

"It is a sombre duty." Said Sir Whirl.

"It's been three years!" Cried the Fool. "Every method has been tried! Priests, poetry, women, art, winsome children, sombre songs, elixirs of the Sun and Moon, the Nightmare drugs of Thaum. Nothing moves the King at all! The laws go un-confirmed and the taxes unreformed, the ceremonies wither on the branch, the Birds of Crime steal ever more, the awful things that used to fear the sun are now seen openly at morning from the corner of the eye, there are bandits behind every hedge, an enchantress in every tower and Gorget Vile the Black Snail Knight grows ever more cunning and cruel in his schemes!"

At this the Snail Knights stood downcast and stared at the cracks in the floor.

"The land is in a sorry state." Said Bedlam Frail.

"In some ways it is worse" whispered Ham Floret "than to have no King at all. At least then" he muttered under his breath "some kind of democratic constitution might be worked out..."

"Enough of that." Said Sir Bird Spiralling. "For we are the Knight of the Snail, and what are Knights without a King, or a King without Knights?"

"Surely soon" said Tangling Chase "this grief must end. Each passion has its season and its time. As day follows night or summer melts the snows, eventually the King must come back to the world."

"But how much time?" said Twine Devise.

Then spoke the quiet Sir Fast with his chin upon his fist. "His sorrow" said he "will be as long as love was deep."

"Then surely we are doomed" said Max Bassoon "for no-one ever loved so true."

"She was the days light to him." Said the Fool.

With that, the Knights all hung their heads, the room grew still and the shadows moved across the floor.

"I must away" spoke the Fool after a time "soon he will arise and stand before the dark and I must be there to see he does not jump."

"Wait" said Sir Bird Spiralling "are we not the heroes of the land? Sir Chrime, is any man of nobler heart than you? And you Sir Whirl, has any man been less afraid? Sir Rime Grotesque, is any knight of finer craft? Sir Vortex Frail, hath ever sweeter soul been matched with firmer hand than yours? And you Sir Hand, would any man dare more in service to his

friends? Sir Lucent Void, does any man dream deeper thoughts of ancient lore? And you Sir Fast, is any knight of greater penetrating thought?"

"Perhaps" replied Sir Fast "Sir Gorget Vile."

"Enough!" said Sir Bird Spiralling "We are the Knights of the Snail!"

"Huzzah!" Cried approximately one third of the Knights of the Snail.

"There is no key without a lock, no night without a dawn, no grief without an end. The land is wide and wild and strange and bordered by impossibilities yet unexplored. What fear have we of danger or mischance? Whatever ails the King, let us go forth!"

"Indeed!" Cried approximately two thirds of the Knight of the Snail.

"Somewhere in the weird and turning world must lie some unknown thing or durance strange that can unlock the sorrows of the King." So speaking he stood up on the table knocking over a basket of fruit and drawing his gleaming sword.

"I make my sloath!" cried Sir Bird Spiralling (for so are named the 'Slow Oaths' of the Snail Knights) "I swear that I shall range the whole world wide, dare any danger, brave any foe, seek any mystery and venture any unknown path until I find some means to ease the sorrows of the King!"

"Hooray!" Cried ninety four per cent of the Knights of the Snail and drew their blades and waved them in the air, all except Sir Fast, who sat quietly with his chin upon his fist.

"I think" said he "there can very well be keys without a lock, a night without a day must come at last, and grief is no bounded kingdom to be noted on the map, for it is edgeless, vast and dark."

At this the Snail Knights paused. Their hearts grew cold, their eyes grew dull and swords began to droop.

"And yet" went on Sir Fast "the King is kind, and has always been my friend, and so" he calmly drew and raised his sword "I add my sloath to yours."

"The King!" cried one hundred per-cent of the Knights of the Snail (barring both Sir Gorget Vile and Sextant Wrought).

And so, with this great sloath their famous quests began.

Story 4

The Tale of Sir Bird Spiralling

No sooner had his sloath been spake and even as the Snail Knights cheered “The King!”, but Sir Bird Spiralling leapt from the table, ran from the room, mounted his snail ‘Caribas’ (whose swirls were shaded like autumnal leaves) and, without even sheathing his sword he had travelled several leagues at speed into the soft and growling country that closed in round the castle of the Curlicue Throne.

As he rode the light died slowly in the air and as the leaves let go their green the moon arrived and gilded them in silver robes.

“Caribas I am lost” said Sir Bird Spiralling “and I am a fool. For, so much do I love the king and doing all things right and good that I have set upon my quest without thinking where to go or why, and this is not wise action for a knight.”

And so speaking he sheathed his sword which burned in the moonlight like a white sail in the stars and looked about to see what he could see.

Behind him he saw the suns lees staining the sky and, drawn on the horizon like a fleck of ink, was a tiny line straight up and down.

“There Caribas is the tallest tower of the castle of the curlicue throne” said Bird Spiralling “and in its highest window is the King, gazing, as do I, at the sun falling from the sky, and there I may not go for I will seem the biggest fool alive to have run from the room as I did without knowing where to go or why and the other knights will laugh.”

So he turned to the fore and looked into the moonlit growling lands to see what he could see,

and there, where the margin of the moon met the forest dressed in silver light, he saw another tiny pencil scratch of black.

“Here Caribas is a tower unknown to me” said Sir Bird Spiralling. “Well, there is nothing to do but brazen it out and go on and hope to meet with one well versed in lore who will advise me on the nature of my quest.” And so he guided Caribas towards the shadowed tower.

The forest then came quickly on, looking up, its branches seemed to wrestle with the meagre stars and the growls and mutters of that midnight land grumbled at his heels.

“Caribas” he said “I would the night were a little less dark and the trees a little less close.” but then he took a breath. “But this is not brave speaking for a knight.” And so he fell silent and gripped his sword and shared no more his fears with Caribas, and after several dreamlike hours a strange and twanging sound came creeping through the trees and as he followed it the tower that crossed the moons eye came in sight.

In a clearing in the forest was a mighty swirl of stone like the shell of a gigantic snail, which made a spiral hill, and on the summit of that hill there was no tower, but a black titanic tree was wrapped entirely up in silk, and this was not the pleasant kind of silk for it seemed to Sir Bird Spiralling that these were many wreathes of spiders webs.

“Caribas, this troubles me” said Sir Bird Spiralling “and yet, it does seem that something makes this nest of webs their home, for look, a light burns somewhere up above, and some spaces there are that might be windows, and listen Caribas, someone here is playing the Sitar.”

And in truth the soft mangling of a badly-played Sitar did echo oddly through the woods for its player was of passing clumsy hand, although Sir Bird Spiralling was too honourable and kind to mention this to Caribas.

“Perhaps Caribas, there is some comely maiden captured and kept prisoner in this tower of webs by aid of dark enchantment or a spider of enormous size, whiling away her lonely hours by learning the Sitar, awaiting rescue by some knight.”

Then he paused a moment and thought:

“Probably the dark enchanter turns into a spider, or visa versa, it seems like the kind of thing that they would do.”

So he rode towards the tower and waved his sword which, dark through it was, still caught the faint allowance of the gloomy stars and shone like a cresting wave.

“Ho there! O Master of the tower of webs, come forth!”

The twanging wrangling of the Sitar ceased and the light inside the tower of webs shifted and came forth to a space and he saw a lady and a lamp, and the lamp was passing bright and the lady passing dark and in the moon her hair and eyes seemed like a dark and stormy sea in bands of gold and white.

“Master call you?” she said “Who cries so and disturbs the dark? Who calls for the master of the tower? And, if you met them what would you do then? And why?”

“I am Sir Bird Spiralling, Knight of the Snail” said Sir Bird Spiralling “and I would challenge him to feats of arms, and as to why, have found it is a complex question, with a beginning but no easily determined end. let me say only that a lady passing fair such as yourself might need and require rescue from this durance vile.”

“Might I?” said the lady with the lamp “Let’s have a little more of the why.”

“Well”, began Sir Bird Spiralling, “the code of chivalry, as handed down from ages past...”

“Not quite that far” said the lady with the lamp “only go back a little beyond tonight, to the events that brought you here.”

Sir Bird Spiralling thought for a moment. “The King is cloaked in sorrows deep and grief that seems to have no end and I have sworn to range the whole world wide to find some answer for his pain. As,” he added “have numerous other Knights of the Snail.”

“How fortunate to be a King,” said the lady “whose every sorrow brings forth noble sloaths. How long Sir Bird have you adventured in this quest, and what great heroic acts have you achieved?”

“My name is Bird Spiralling, and not Sir Bird” said Sir Bird Spiralling “as I think you know well.” And then he paused. “So far my quest has lasted perhaps twelve hours and all that I have done is come here and speak to you. And I think” he added darkly “that you, in fact, are Mistress of this tower and an Enchantress and that you mock my sloath and require no aid from either me or any other knight.”

“Not that slow then.” said the lady with the lamp “And what will you do now Sir Spiralling Bird?”

Sir Bird Spiralling sank in his saddle. “In truth I do not know. I must seek a bane of sorrow but know not what or where that is for, I was so set upon my sloath and so much love the

King and all things right and good that I dashed away upon the venture without requesting wisdom from my fellow knights, which I see now that I should have done.”

“Do you ever lie?” said the lady with the lamp.

“A true knight never does.” said Sir Bird Spiralling “Yet I shall speak no more by shouting in the dark and I shall leave you to your spiders and the songs of your Sitar. On Caribas.” And so he turned to leave.

As he moved away the light went out and the Caribas moved slitherly into dark between the trees he heard the sound of feet running swiftly over grass and a voice said:

“Wait.”

And Caribas probed his antlers in the gloom, for snails can travel very neatly in the dark should they wish, though knights not always can. And the voice said again:

“Wait Sir Bird Spiralling, I am in need of aid.”

Sir Bird Spiralling turned in his saddle and he saw the lady was much harmed, for her skin was dark and her silks were bright and bands of gold were on her arms and in the bands were sets and clasps for seven jewels and all the jewels were gone and torn away and there were scars upon her arms and on her face for an eye had been taken from her head.

“My Lady!” cried Sir Bird Spiralling, and he leapt from his saddle and knelt upon one knee and offered the hilt of his sword.

“My Lady I beg your forgiveness for I see you are much harmed and robbed of your rich attire and are in great need of protection. Only name the villains who have done this and I swear as a knight I shall avenge you and return your gems.”

“It was the Birds of Crime” she said “and your protection is a little late. Eyes do not grow back and they have taken more from me than eyes or gems.” But she reached down gently to his hand where it held up the hilt of his sword. “And consider this Sir Knight, if you swear to me as well as to your King, which sloath takes precedence? How serve you both at once? You must think a little more before you act.”

So Sir Bird Spiralling thought.

“Yet you say you are in need of aid. Perhaps if you could lend me some assistance in my quest I might in return give you the aid you need and by accountancy could count the two quests one.”

“Perhaps I could.” she said “I am called Ilvoyne.” (Which rhymes with ‘Scone’). “Come with me inside my tower of webs and I will tell you a tale that may be of some use.”

“My Lady” said Sir Bird Spiralling “your tower lacks a door.”

“I climb” she replied, then noting his sceptical looks she said “Do not fear I will speak to the spiders and ask them to make you a door.”

“I had not known that spiders spoke.” replied the knight.

“It is a very silent speech” said the Enchantress “and people rarely listen well.”

So she brought him inside her tower of veils and gave the knight good cheer and this is the story she told:

When the world was very young the sky at night was full of stars much brighter than today and when people then were sad they would go out under the bright night sky and look up into the river of light and their sorrows would drift away like breath freezing in the winter air.

But then the stars grew perilous and strange and people grew afraid. A shield was made and the sky at night grew dull and black with only the meagre trundling gleams we see today.

Then, from the furthest corner of the world, ice came like a beating drum. It grew and grew and seemed to have no reason and no end.

A man then had an idea about the ice and wanted to find out if it was true. He could not find out alone, so he took his daughter with and went to speak to a silver city that strode (they did that then) and asked for it to take them deep into the waste where nothing lived. The city said it would. And so they went.

It was a long journey with many perils and adventures but eventually they came the furthest limit of the world.

“It is the bodies of the sorrows” said the man “all the sorrows of the world collect, with nowhere left for them to go they sit and die and freeze. And sorrow has no end, and neither will the ice.”

At this his daughter was much dole, so he said “Perhaps there’s something we can do.”

What he did nobody knows, only the city returned, but the ice slowed down and stopped and things calmed down and so they stand today.

Then she saw the knight was sleeping in his armour in his chair, and she smiled and went to bed.



She woke to find him gone, in rage she grabbed her sitar and ran out.

As luck would have it snails are neither swift nor often of great stealth and the trail of Caribas was neither long or hard to find.

“WHAT” said Ilvoyne the Enchantress, “do you mean Sir Knight by leaving without speaking, thanks or cause? This is not good action for a knight.” And the glare from her dark eye was like the gleaming of a poisoned spoon.

“Oh.” Said Sir Bird Spiralling, and stopped Caribas. “I had not thought of that. It only seemed quite clear when I woke up that I should find at once the man who solved the riddle of the endless ice and thereby learn the secrets of sorrow and so save my king and the sooner that quest is done the sooner I shall be able to offer you all necessary aid, so I set off at once with the sun. I see now I was rude.”

“Rude and stupid.” Said Ilvoyne. “For do you not think it would be wiser to seek out the silver city since that was the last thing to see them alive? And would you not require a guide and aid in such a quest for, since yesterday you did not even know that it was, today you still do not know where it is?”

“But where am I to find such a guide?” said Sir Bird Spiralling.

“Shift a bit.” Ilvoyne said, and without waiting she climbed Caribas and sat cross-legged on his shell.

“This is irregular and strange!” Cried Sir Bird Spiralling. “To carry an Enchantress about on Caribas. What will I say and what will people think?”

“Say you found a one-eyed woman in the woods and offered her protection and she came to aid you on your quest.” And then she said no more but only sat squinting her eye and plucking slow but fiercely on the strings of her sitar.



Time passed on its march. They searched for many winters and the trials and adventures of their quest, (which have been spoke of in other books) shall not be repeated here, but eventually it came in sight. A silver city with a single spire that moved with swift solemnity on silver legs, never ceasing, ever-stepping, always somewhat out of reach, blinking on the headlands like a mote, passing through the silent valleys, ghosting past the still hills and frightening the hovering hawks that saw it loom beneath then a few feet.

Long leagues they made the chase, sometimes the Knight kept watch, sometimes Ilvoyne, and the snail caribas never tired or ceased, his horns reached forwards and he quested fiercely with all his speed.

Yet, the speed of snails is never great and though they travelled madly through the turning cycle of the world, the city grew no closer, but seemed always a little further on, like the head of a pin at the back of an unused room.

“It wearies me to see it so.” said Sir Bird Spiralling.

“If words were speed we’d be there now.” replied Ilvoyne.

“Chase you the silver city?” said a voice.

“Who goes there?” said Sir Bird Spiralling, and “shift over” as he and Ilvoyne awkwardly swapped places and he took his place at the reins of Caribas.

When they looked to see who spoke they saw a hoary knight, grey from the dust of the road and bent with age.

“Who goes there?” Said Sir Bird Spiralling.

“It is only I, Sir Tergol Geiv” said the old man leaning on his broken lance. “Oh!” he said “I see you are a hardy man, full-armed, and with a lady prisoner. Ware you Sir, though I be old, I am yet fierce and though my quest has claimed these many years I shall not stand to see a damsel endangered.” And so he staggered forth to bar their way.

“Again?” Said Ilvoyne. “I can’t see.”

“Fear not my friend!” Cried Sir Bird Spiralling “for it is I, Sir Bird Spiralling, Knight of the Snail. This lady is not my prisoner but my friend and I, like you, am on a noble quest, which (I hesitate to mention) you currently obstruct.”

"A quest?" said the old man. Then he paused for a moment and glinted gleamingly at them. "Ahh, you seek the silver city with the single spire."

"Indeed Sir Giev, and even as I watch it slips from view."

"It does" exclaimed the grey old knight "I tell you now this quest is also mine. For long uncounted years I chased its gleaming limbs, I chased so long my snail died under me."

"Seven sorrows!" cried Sir Bird Spiralling "such fate is dole indeed."

"It is" said the grey Sir Giev "and his head fell and face moved into shadow, though his eye still gleamed. "It is very dole and sorrowful twice, for only lately did I learn a thing which might have brought me safe unto its silver legs, yet with no snail to climb them, it matters not."

"Who is this man?" Said Ilvoyne, sticking her head around the shoulder of Sir Bird Spiralling, turning awkwardly on Caribas.

"Ah ha!" Cried Sir Bird Spiralling "this is good news indeed, for, as our aims converge, we may do one another aid."

"Aid me?" cried the knight in grey "Ahh ha ha ha. Whist not I know your scheme. You are some knight of crimes and secret thought, wandering the world with an enchantress at your side, I doubt not you shall smile for my secret and, once gained, bash in my brain-pan with a brick."

And he gripped his broken lance in shaking hands and made as if to run.

"By my Sloath good Sir and by my honour as a Snail Knight True, flee not! For I am as likely to pull down a cloud from the sky as to work wrake upon a gentleman so steeped in Time."

And with that Sir Bird Spiralling leapt down from the back of Caribas and knelt upon the earth, while Ilvoyne the Enchantress, now seeing clearly for the first, observed the scene.

"A sir, you make a noble figure on the earth." Replied the grey old knight. "Perhaps the make of things is as you say and you are what you seem and my fears are the madness of a lonely lost old man whose snail is dead."

"I swear it is so." Replied Sir Bird Spiralling.

"Wait." Said the Enchantress Ilvoyne.

“A but do you truly swear?” said the knight so grey with dust. “Do you swear on your honour as a Snail Knight true that you shall neither offer me harm or . . .” he paused “or even lay a hand to stay my course? Do you swear it as a knight?”

“I do so swear.” Said Sir Bird Spiralling. “By the great faith and trust that I hold in my duty as a knight that I shall never do you harm in any way, or even lay a hand to stay your course.”

“Hhn.” Said the Enchantress Ilvoyne with her head in her hands.

“It is done then.” Said the dusty knight in grey. “Come and I shall tell you the secret of the city with the silver spire.”

So he lead them to an outcropping of rock where the mountain tilted like a counterfeit weight.

“Here,” he pointed down below “the thing shall pass close by, and if, at the moments of its passing it should hear and see a certain thing then it shall pause. Pause long enough for you snail to reach its way to near the top of one of its long limbs.”

“What is the thing it needs to hear and see?” Said Ilvoyne as she peered the long way down.

“A scream and the body of a girl.” Replied the knight in grey.

“How curious that you should know this.” Said Ilvoyne.

“It is a sad city.” Replied the grey knight.

“This is excellent!” Said Sir Bird Spiralling, “for you Ilvoyne can simply descend to the bottom of the valley, wait for the city to approach, scream and lie down. On its pause Caribas and I”

“And I” Sais Sir Geiv.

“And Sir Giev” went on Sir Bird Spiralling “will mount its silver leg and enter the city on its back.”

“I should not go so far from you.” Said Ilvoyne.

“Oh but you are an excellent climber, as you have proven many times. You will be quite safe.” Said Sir Bird Spiralling.

“I may be Bird, but you may not.” Replied Ilvoyne.

“The Spire approaches even now.” Said Tergol Geiv. “And it shall not return for many years. Will you make the adventure and seek out the secret of your quest? Or do you dare it

not?"

"I will board, discover the secret and return to you with Caribas." Said Sir Bird Spiralling to Ilvoyne.

"This is unwise." She said.

"This is our only chance!" he replied. "Are we to chase and wander for so long only to surrender at the leap? It was your advice and stirring tale that brought us here."

"It was." She said. "Be safe." And so she slipped over the edge of the ledge and went down.

"That woman climbs like a spider." Said Sir Tergol Geiv. As she nimble-limbed her way across the rock.

"It is curious you should say so." Said Sir Bird Spiralling. "For she learnt it from the spiders at the same time they taught her their tongue."

"It is a thing I do not know." Said the knight in grey, and a darkness passed across his eyes. "Look." He pointed to the valleys head. And the light of the nearly-set sun the spire gleamed and showed itself among the hills.

Sir Bird Spiralling waved to Ilvoyne where she waited, a patch of colour on the gloomy ground.

"Aaa" went Ilvoyne, and fell flat upon her back and went entirely still.

The city came in sight. It was beautiful and tall with many legs. The legs were so long and the movements of the city so continuous and smooth that where their feet flicked silently back and forth to the ground, there was nothing but a silver blur, like the shadow motion of a horses hooves, which at a gallop move too fast for the eye to apprehend, though the body of the speeding horse is quite clear.

Sir Bird Spiralling saw the rolling legs as they advanced and looked down at Ilvoyne where she waited in the dark and he became afraid.

"I have made a terrible mistake." He said quietly to himself.

"No time for that boy." Said the knight in grey, though, now he looked more closely it seemed to Sir Bird Spiralling that the armour under the road dust and the grey cloak was a darker colour still. But it was too late to think.

"It is here!" Said Tergol Giev. And it was so. Directly in front of them, only a few feet away, the silver leg of the city stood like the trunk of a strong tree, and above, only a short

snail-climb, were the silver battlements.

“NoW!” Said Tergol Geiv. “Now! Now! Now!”

“On Caribas.” Said Sir Bird Spiralling, and Caribas bravely reached out to find purchase in the silver limb with his snail-foot.

Down down far below, the Enchantress Ilvoyne peeked through her almost closed eyes up into the shadow of the city as it stood directly up above her head. A silver limb landed close by and she knew that so great was the weight of the city that, even spread over so many legs, if even one should touch her, it would pop her like a bubble and leave nothing but a smear upon the ground.

She did not move, but waited patiently while the city paused, and she thought about the distance to the closest leg.

Then Caribas, the knights and the Enchantress all heard a voice like many bells that briefly filled the valley like a song.

“It is not her.” Said the voice, and the city made again to move.

“Now Caribas it must be now.” Whispered Sir Bird Spiralling, and as the limb shifted out of place, Caribas adhered just enough of his snaily foot and they swung out over the abyss with both knights clinging to the saddle on his shell.

Far far below in the darkness of the oncoming night and the shadow of the living city, the Enchantress Ilvoyne leapt to her feet and sprang. At the moment of its movement she hung on the silver limb and though it swung with the speed of a whips tip and the world blurred around her and her hair lashed in a halo round her face she still clung firmly on. And slowly and surely she began to climb the silver leg and mutter to herself “knights . . . knights . . . knights”.

Now turn we to Caribas, for he had climbed the cities battlements and those two clinging on saw for the first time the shining colonnades and metallic plazas that gleamed like polished zinc and gave back the light of even the dull swirling stars that remained. Its halls and temples seemed sometimes like shells, or the wind-carved boles of blasted trees, or sometimes like strange works of mechanical art. The streets were clear and clean and empty of all life, it was a beautiful as bone, darker than a dying thought and as empty as a skeletons head. Not one light burned anywhere, except at the tip of the silver spire.

“There” pointed the now quite dark-grey knight “there is is, leave this slow snail and let us go.”

But Sir Bird Spiralling only looked worriedly over the battlements into the dark beneath the city as it passed. He did not see the speck of coloured silk slowly inching its way up the leg.

“Pft” said Tergol Geiv “stay or go it matters not to me.” But then he turned and looked into the darkness of the cities streets, and seemed for a moment to be afraid. “My friend” he said “the sooner this is done, the sooner you shall see her again. Come with me, let us run.”

And so they ran together through the enfolding dark, with Caribas reaching forwards with his telescoping eyes, bravely but slowly following after them into the night.

The Enchantress Ilvoyne did not see them leave, but only climbed her way by cunning holds that only the smallest spider could possibly find, and as she made that long impossible crime she muttered further to herself “knights, snails, birds” and “crime” and “gems gems gems”. She went up like an insect up a trouser leg and the higher she got the faster she could go as the swinging of the city-limb was less.

The two knights arrived panting at the base of the silver spire.

“There is no doorway.” Said Sir Bird Spiralling, and it was so for, except for some small irregular holes, the wall was smooth and without breach though higher up a window could be seen.

The other knight did not reply but took the shaft he wielded and, counting under his breath, he jammed it into one of the holes, and so a silver door appeared and, like a curtain being pulled aside, revealed a way inside.

“It was not a lance at all.” Said Sir Bird Spiralling. Sir Tergol Geiv did not reply but grinned in the darkness and, snatching the shaft from its place he dashed inside. Sir Bird Spiralling saw that the silver curtain was about to close and so quickly dived inside as well.

At the battlements of the city, the Enchantress Ilvoyne, shaking with wrack and ruin and running with sweat, clasped her final hand and rolled onto the cities streets.

“That was the worst climb I have ever had.” She said, and found that, so mighty was her deed and hard her path that she could barely raise an arm for her hands shook like trembling leaves.

“Where are they now?” She said and rolled onto her feet. And then she saw the trail of Caribas shining twice sliver on the already silvery ground.

Inside the silver spire Sir Bird Spiralling raced up a darkened spiral stair with Tergol Geiv

running ahead, always disappearing out of sight.

“Who are you?” Cried Sir Bird Spiralling. “What scheme is this?” And then he burst into a well lit room at the top of the slivery spire. On one wall was a silver mirror, vast and curved, in the other was a window from which it seemed he could see the whole world, so far above the ground they were, and in the centre was a crystal sword lodged in a clasp of stone.

“A magic sword!” Said Sir Bird Spiralling.

“It is not a sword, and this is not a lance and I am not Sir Tergol Giev.” Replied the knight, and he went to grasp the crystal blade.

“I know now well what I did not see before.” Said Sir Bird Spiralling, and he drew his sword which burned in the moonlight like a sail in the stars and barred the way. “For you are Gorget Vile, the Black Snail knight.”

“Ha Ha Ha.” Said Gorget Vile.

“I am, and I am unarmed and at the mercy of your blade. But...” He paused. “I do seem to recall a recent oath. One made by you. What was it?” He tilted his head and thought. “Ah, I remember, then he spoke in a cruel mock of Sir Bird Spirallings voice “By the great faith and trust that I hold in my duty as a knight, that I shall never do you harm in any way, or” and here Gorget Vile smiled his terrible smile “or even lay a hand to stay your course’. Do I have that right?” And he reached out and pressed his empty hand slowly against Bird Spiralling’s bare blade.

It was at this time that the Enchantress Ilvoyne arrived exhausted at the base of the silver spire, for she found that Caribas had stopped, finding nowhere else to go.

“It is you Caribas.” She said, and leaned on him and cooled her forehead on his shell. “Are they inside? Is there no door? Something is very wrong Caribas.”

Then she looked up to the window at the top and saw in that light, the shadows of moving men.

“There! Do you see?” And she pointed upwards to the light. “Climb Caribas. Can you climb? For I cannot and I fear he is in danger from that dark suspicious knight.”

Caribas did not hesitate but reached out his snail foot and began to climb that featureless tall tower, Ilvoyne rapped his reins around her shaking arms and hung on as she could.

“I...” said Sir Bird Spiralling, and though he did not lower his blade, he stepped slowly back as the bare skin of the hand of Gorget Vile pressed against its edge. And so the Black Snail

Knight came quietly on.

"Many years and many harms have brought me here." Whispered Gorget Vile as he slowly strode towards the crystal sword. "And many secrets cruelly bought. City," he said aloud "City do you hear me?"

And the voice like silver bells again rang out. "I do."

"City," said Gorget Vile "tell this poor fool what that thing is." And he pointed to the crystal sword.

"It is my mind." said the ringing voice.

"And," said Gorget Vile "If someone else should hold your mind?"

"I must obey." Replied the voice.

"And so you see" said Gorget Vile "all this city shall be mine." they both looked down and saw that the crystal blade was close "and from it I shall reave this world." And he reached down and drew it forth.

But not in full. For as he reached Sir Bird Spiralling cried "No!" and he dropped his sword and knelt down to grasp the icy edges of the crystal blade with his bare hands.

And outside on the surface of the spire, Ilvoyne the Enchantress heard his cry and shouted "Faster Caribas, faster!"

But snails are rarely swift.

"Fool!" Said Gorget Vile, and he looked to Sir Bird Spiralling's sword lying naked on the ground, then thought again. He pressed his foot against the snail knights head and trod him down and heaved with all his might at the handle of the crystal blade.

But, though the blade bit into his hands and his blood watered the silver floor and Sir Gorget Vile kicked and beat against his head with awful blows, Sir Bird Spiralling would not unlace his hands from around that ice-sharp edge.

"City!" Cried Sir Bird Spiralling. "Do you hear me?"

"I do." Said the bell-like voice.

"City!" Said Sir Bird Spiralling as Gorget Vile forced his head down into his own blood which ran through his fingers like wine. "What happened to the man and girl you took into the ice so long ago? What is the secret of the sorrowful ice?"

"I LEFT HER THERE!" Cried the city in a ringing voice so sad and loud that the two knights held for a second in their strife.

"I promised to protect her. I took them to the furthest point and both went in and neither one came out. I waited many years. The ice grew slowly round my feet. I was afraid. I ran. And ever since I have looked for her. But I will not find her. She is dead. She is dead because I left her in the ice."

"Ha Ha Ha." Said Gorget Vile, and with one heave he drew at last the blood-stained crystal blade.

"Wait." Said the Enchantress Ilvoyne. And she leapt in through the window from the back of Caribas, picked up the sword of Sir Bird Spiralling and with the very last of the strength of her arm she swung it lightly once against the crystal blade which broke like dawn and fell in shining pieces on the ground.

"Aaaa" said Gorget Vile.

"At last." Whispered the voice like bells.

"Ilvoyne." Said Sir Bird Spiralling.

And the silver city fell down dead to the earth, and Sir Bird Spiralling picked up Ilvoyne and leapt from the window to Caribas, and Caribas opened his huge snail foot and enfolded them both in his slime and curled around them softly as they fell.

And as the city tilted and collapsed, Caribas fell for many a long while. He fell the length of the silver spire and he fell again the height of the cities silver limbs and he smashed to pieces on the ground and died, and when in the day Sir Bird Spiralling awoke and saw the ruined pieces of his snail he wept.

And they were sorrowful times that came.



Slowly, with rags wrapped around his wounded hands, Sir Bird Spiralling began his walk towards the furthest corner of the world. Neither he nor the Enchantress Ilvoyne paused to search the fallen silver ruin where it lay, or checked to see if Gorget Vile still lived.

He did. But that is dealt with in another tale.

Though the lady and the knight walked for many leagues and their feet trod down the slow time of the world, there were no adventures and no happy meetings on this journey. The world grew sparse and cold. The earth turned first to frost and then to ice. One day they saw no blades of grass, one day they saw no stone.

They had walked for so long and such rough miles that few who looked upon them would have thought they looked upon an Enchantress and a Knight of the Snail.

But no-one looked at all. There was no-one there to speak or see, and they spoke but little to each other, only trudging on with the cold as their compass. Wherever the path was most fearful and frozen, that way they went, the bearded man with wounded hands and behind him a few steps, the bent woman carrying an instrument on her back.

When Sir Bird Spiralling spoke, it was not to Ilvoyne, but Caribas.

“You would not like these sharp stones Caribas, the cold would chill your foot.”

The air turned white and the sun became an unseen blur. Their faces froze. They passed the wrecks of ruined ships rising up out of the ice like black splinters from a frozen wound.

One day they both saw towers rise up from the unending turquoise deeps. They hurried towards them, but found only the spikes of an ancient city, one swallowed by the ice long ago and almost visible as a black blur many fathoms down.

“This is not the furthest corner of the world.” Said Sir Bird Spiralling. And they went on.

Sir Bird Spiralling began to know that he would die. He felt the cold air eating at his lungs and felt the tremors in his legs. He counted his breaths and the beats of his heart and he measured the distance in his mind to the nearest water and the nearest warmth.

He said “You must leave me.”

“That, I will not do.” Said Ilvoyne.

That night a strange thing took place.

“Wake up.” Said Ilvoyne “and look.”

The sky was made of many strands of interlocking light. Like paint from many cans spilled in a curling maze, or long ribbons of interwoven storm, or like a trees rings in the polished surface of an Arm d’ore. Like paint-brush clouds of powdered gem. So many were the colours of the sky and so deeply did they glimmer and reflect that the silent ice became a kind of mirror wonderland.

“Perhaps,” said Ilvoyne “some other knight has succeeded in their quest and this is the result.”

“It is good” said Sir Bird Spiralling “for you may use this light to gain a march on your way home.”

“I will not go.” Said Ilvoyne.

“It is strange you should not” said Sir Bird Spiralling “for I have neither need nor use for you.”

“Why speak you so?” Said Ilvoyne.

“Why?” Said Sir Bird Spiralling “Why speak so to a liar and a fraud? To a magician whose first words to me were lies, whose deeds are manipulations? Why speak so to a woman who has followed me about, hiding her wiles under the protection of my sword, who’s tales and lies have lead us here to certain death, a woman whose delusions and exaggerations and deceits have wrecked my quest and cursed my life and killed my only snail?”

“That is not true.” Said Ilvoyne.

“Not true? Do you deny that you first thoughts on meeting me were towards your own advantage? That if you had never spoken and we had never met, that neither of us would be here, that the silver city would still live and that Caribas would be alive as well?”

“You speak so to drive me away.” Said the Enchantress Ilvoyne.

“Indeed I do! And why would I not you stinking, stupid hag? Do you think I prize your wittering words? Or the awful cursed twangs of your Sitar? An instrument” he added “which you simply do not know how to play? To you think I like your noise? It is vile. I have tolerated you. This is what I think of your Sitar.”

And he rose up his foot and stamped it to pieces in the frozen ground.

“No!” Cried Ilvoyne, but there were only fragments left. “What is this? What knight is this? Have you forgotten the Sloath you made me on the night we met?”

“Forget!” Said Sir Bird Spiralling “it is you who have forgotten! For at *your advice* I MADE NO SLOATH TO YOU! And the very first morning that I could I left you sleeping in your horrid webs! Ever since then you have followed me! And all that I have done over the long time of our quest is to tolerate your female stupidity with an even face, as is my duty as a knight! Did you think” he came closer “that I felt something more? For you? An ugly and deranged one-eyed enchantress covered with spiders?”

“Ha Ha Ha.” Said Sir Bird Spiralling. “You are ridiculous and sad. By all means follow me. Follow me to your pointless death. For you mean nothing to me. Nothing at all.”

And he smiled a terrible smile.

And the Enchantress Ilvoyne stood silently under the perilous bright stars for a good long while. And then she turned and walked away.

And Sir Bird Spiralling went on into the ice.

There were sounds and voices in the ice that people could not hear unless they were alone. And now Sir Bird Spiralling was very alone indeed. The voices came creaking up out of the deep blue darkness and they moved in skitters through the cracks, they came first only in the night where the ice shined madly under the multi-coloured stars, then they came also in the pale white days and told him things he did not wish to know.

The knight cried out to the voices in the ice, at night he cried out to the perilous stars. Sometimes he could be seen with his sword drawn to challenge enemies that would not show themselves, sometimes he called out ‘Ilvoyne’ or ‘Caribas’.

The tears froze on his cheeks into a mask of ice and his beard grew long and few who saw him would have guessed that he was indeed a man, let alone a one-time knight.

And it seemed he wandered so a good long while, until, one shining night, he saw a bright flickering in the distance, and following it he came upon a castle in the ice.

It was the Engine of Sorrows and it was a great machine of steel and iron and frozen pain. And before it was a lightning bridge, and standing in the centre of the bridge there was a knight.

As Sir Bird Spiralling came closer, he saw the knight was terrible indeed. Tall and strong and armoured head to foot in the blue-black prised darkness that waited miles beneath the frozen world. The sword which this knight carried ate light like an eclipsed moon and his shield was as smooth and as hard as a glaciers heart. It seemed the knight had waited a long while, and was content to wait a long while more, for he took no notice of the cold or the howling wind nor the awful perilous stars, of the softly moaning voices from the ice or the insane crackling of the lightning bridge. And the features of this knight could not be seen, though it seemed to Sir Bird Spiralling that he somehow recognised this man, like a memory of a dream. And though the breath of Sir Bird Spiralling formed a pulsing plume of frost against his mouth, the knight upon the bridge gave out no breath at all.

“To cross is death.” Said the knight upon the bridge.

“Who is this Caribas?” Said Sir Bird Spiralling. And he waited, but no answer came. He drew his sword.

“I require of you, by the trust and honour of your position as a knight” said Sir Bird Spiralling as he stepped one foot upon the raging bridge “that you reveal to me your name!” Though at this time Sir Bird Spiralling looked more like a ragged madman than a knight of any kind.

“You know me” replied the knight upon the bridge, and seemed almost to smile “I am Sir Sans Coeur. We know each other very well indeed.”

“I know you not!” Said Sir Bird Spiralling, and took another step.

“Come on and die.” Replied Sir Sans Coeur.

At this Sir Bird Spiralling screamed and the two knights came together beneath the perilous stars like two contending storms.

Sir Bird Spiralling rained mad blows upon Sir Sans Coeur and so great was the strength of his hate that the bridge itself shook a little under the swings of his shining sword which came down like star-stones striking the earth.

Yet Sir Sans Coeur remained unmoved. Every blow rebounded from his shield of ice or from his frozen armour, and he replied to every stroke with feigns and traverses so fast they were like the licking tongues of snakes, so that the blood of Sir Bird Spiralling dripped down his legs and left the frozen prints of bloody feet upon the bridge.

These frozen prints moved backwards step by step.

With one last scream of rage Sir Bird Spiralling put every piece of strength that he possessed into his blade and brought it down with the speed and force of a guillotine in a blow so mighty that it seemed that it could cleave the very earth. And it cut even through the shield of ice wielded by Sir Sans Coeur, and stuck there.

And with the flick of a wrist Sir Sans Coeur snatched the sword from Sir Bird Spirallings hand and it skittered away and Sir Bird Spiralling fell to his knees and he saw as Sir Sans Coeur moved his shield that the ice-armoured knight had, where his heart should be, a void like the hole left in the surface of a thickly frozen pond when a stone is flung through it and the ice has re-formed, sending out straight strands and serrated teeth and yet it cannot close the gap, and he looked into the eyes of Sir Sans Coeur and felt his frozen blade press its point upon his heart.

It was at that moment that the shield of the sky closed and the dim trundling stars returned to their accustomed state and the ice darkened and the land became quiet.

And Sir Bird Spiralling saw that there was no lightning on the bridge and that the Engine of Sorrows, though still real, was now a comprehensible size, and he heard the voices coming from the ice reduce and fade, though, for the rest of his life they never entirely went away. And he looked upon the bridge and saw the splatters of his frozen blood and the red ice footprints of his feet where it seemed he had contended with a mighty foe, and the signs of much combat both upon the bridge and upon his own flesh.

But he could not see Sir Sans Coeur, and when he looked down at his hands he saw that the pommel of his sword was lodged within the ice, and its tip was at its heart and with one move he was about to throw himself upon the sword and die.

He held there for a good long while.

Then he stood, and using his sword as a crutch, for he was much harmed, he limped across the bridge and into the engine of sorrows.

And there he found a sleeping girl.

The engine, though strange, was neatly made and near its entrance was a room with many frozen stores and the body of a man.

"How long have you been here?" Said Sir Bird Spiralling "For it seems you could have died at any time." And as he looked closer he saw the face of the man seemed neither fearful, nor hopeful, but quiet, as if prepared to wait.

Sir Bird Spiralling walked on into the angles of the strange machine and after a time he came to its centre and he found a strange bed and a girl sleeping upon it, and she was moaning softly in her sleep as if she was afraid and so he reached down gently and woke her up.

"Father?" Said the girl, and though her face was young her hair was long and grey and her eyes were old.

"No." Said Sir Bird Spiralling. "It is I, Sir Bird Spiralling, once named Knight of the Snail. Do not be afraid."

"You should not wake me up." Replied the girl. "Though I am glad you did. But now the ice will grow." And even as she spoke it seemed the ice groaned a little around them and stretched out its limbs.

"Please," said Sir Bird Spiralling "I have come far and endured much to find the secret of the sorrows. Please tell me what this is and why, and who you are and whence you came."

"It is a machine to stop the ice," Explained the girl. "The stars turn perilous and strange and with them has come madness and despair."

"This I know well." Said Sir Bird Spiralling. "And I am glad that they are seen no more."

"A shield was built around the world to protect us from the fierce stars, but within are trapped the sorrows of the world. The sorrows turned to ice. And so my father brought me here and built this terrible machine. For as long as someone lies here and dreams the sorrows of the world they will not turn to ice. And they will dream without age or time. But now you have woken me the ice will grow once more. And as to who I am and whence I came I do not know, for I have been dreaming the sorrows of the world for so long that little of my self remains."

"This is a sad fate for a lady fair." Said Sir Bird Spiralling.

"I asked for it" replied the girl, "for it hurt me so much to see my father lying here in pain that I woke him and said that I would take his place for a short while."

"It has been longer than a while." Said Sir Bird Spiralling "and I am sorry to inform you that your Father neither stayed nor left but is no more."

"It is as I thought" replied the girl "for I thought I dreamed my own face long ago and those were the final sorrows of his soul."

"Would you like to leave?" Asked Sir Bird Spiralling.

"I would" she said "but", and she turned to look at the sorrowful machine "this dream is grim and dark and without any end and I would not lay it as a burden even on a soul I hate."

"I would" said Sir Bird Spiralling, and he knelt and offered her his hand.

"My Lady, I see you are much harmed and in need of aid. I am a petty knight. I have failed in my duty to my king. I have wasted the years of my youth. I have caused the destruction of the city that brought you here, which quested for you all the days of its life, I have lead the one I love into the waste and I have betrayed and abandoned her, I have torn up the root of my heart and nothing remains there but a void colder than any ice. I beg of you, allow me to take your place here in this engine of sorrows so that at least, at the last, I may do one good thing and release you from your pain and perhaps shame less the honour of my knighthood which I have so badly failed."

“I will go and come back” she said “for I will not leave you here.”

“The ice is very cold” said Sir Bird Spiralling “and should you survive it once I urge you not to try a second time.” And he handed her his sword, which still shone like a white sail under starlight, even in the gloom of the great machine. “Take this to protect you from the dangers in the ice, for though I have failed it, the blade has never failed me in return.”

And he lay down on the bed.

“If you are lonely,” said Sir Bird Spiralling “speak to it and call it ‘Caribas’, and perhaps it will reply.” And he lowered his head and slept.

And that is the tale of Sir Bird Spiralling.