

Translated excerpt

**John Henry Eagle**  
***Der Eiserne König. Ein Abenteuer***

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**John Henry Eagle**  
***The iron king. An adventure story***

Translated by Alisa Jaffa

*When the moon is full on the day of the Restless Souls, the Iron King will arise from the dead. Then the pillar of our world will crumble to dust, and all that grows will wither, and everything upright will sag, and the Iron King will rule forever over Pinafor. And the only one to overcome him will be he who respects the inner life of all living things; and the only one to bring him down will be he who is aware of the power of the five fingers.*

*Thus it is written, and so will it be.*

(From the 'Kryptonomicon')

## 1. The Green Fire

In the first light of dawn a buzzard was circling above Flutwidde, the most fertile part of Pinafor. Way down below, the river Usse snaked its way between the cornfields. Villages snuggled between gentle hills, and cattle grazed in the pastures. After a while the buzzard spied its prey – a mouse nibbling an ear of corn by a track across the fields. The raptor narrowed its circles.

The mouse, catching sight of the buzzard just in time, dashed to the wooded meadow along the bank of the Usse. In her haste she rushed deep into the wood, hopping over roots, until she reached a clearing. There she came to a halt as a new foe appeared before her: humans. As her eyes flickered across the men, armed to the teeth, she began to shake all over, for man was the worst of the predators. She cowered down in the grass, but too late – one of the men, a young lad standing to one side turned his head towards her.

As he caught sight of the mouse, cowering on the ground in front of him, Hans had to smile. When he was small his father had insisted that he should kill the mice in their house, but he had never been able to bring himself to do so. As he threw back his head to breathe in the fresh morning air, he saw a buzzard circling above the clearing.

Then he looked across at Grimm, who was saying something to his men. Hans still well remembered the day that Grimm had picked him up by the wayside – at that time he had been an orphan child begging his way through Pinafor. Grimm had taken him into his band of robbers. To begin with he had been the messenger boy and general dogsbody, but very soon had taken part in robbery and other crimes. He was not happy about any of it, but the band took the place of his family and gave him shelter and support. There was booty aplenty, for since the springtime people seemed to be made of money. They gave up working and lived like lords. Farmers didn't sow their fields, forges turned cold, workshops stayed closed and there were no more pedlars on the highway. Where the money came from no one knew, but bit by bit Pinafore was simply drowning in it, and whoever had the nerve helped himself to

what he wanted.

'Now it's the turn of the villages south of the Usse,' announced Grimm. 'And as soon as we've taken enough, we'll retreat to Greting. That's where we'll share out the spoils.'

'Greting is where the Iron King is buried,' muttered one of the robbers.

'May his soul rot in hell,' whispered another.

'Are you really scared of the Iron King?' Grimm asked scornfully. 'He's been dead for two hundred years. We ought to loot his grave – it's bound to be full of treasure.' And he laughed.

The superstitious robbers stared at him in horror. Yes, the Iron King might well be dead, and his reign of terror long since over, but the myths and legends that still haunted the land meant that he continued to be feared. There were some that held him to be immortal and whispered that he would rise up from the dead to conquer Pinafor a second time.

Hans too was uneasy, for he had heard that in the Greting region, there were monsters living in the sandstone mountains up in the north west of Pinafor. He looked at Grimm as he stood grinning in front of them, his thumbs hooked under his wide belt with seven knives, a sword and a battleaxe hanging from it. Grimm looked after his men well, provided they were obedient, but he could also be evil-tempered and violent, and his vindictiveness was notorious. Hans had witnessed how he had tortured and killed people without so much as batting an eyelid, and he felt a mixture of fear and admiration for his leader.

'You will do as I say', growled Grimm. 'Or do I have to give you a thrashing?' He waved his sword in the air and yelled, 'Women and gold. Our fortune will hold!' The men echoed his cry. While they were packing up, Hans turned back to the mouse, that was still staring at him.

He could not guess that the clever little creature had just had a vision. He saw Hans fighting against Grimm in the pouring rain; he saw him being tortured; how he rode up and down through Pinafor; how he faced up to attacks by heavily armed monsters in one battle after another; how he...but then the robbers departed and the vision of

the mouse faded. She watched in a daze as Hans left. She had completely forgotten about the buzzard.

A split second later it fell like a stone from the sky and killed the mouse. She didn't stand a chance.

The robbers had almost reached the edge of the wood, when Hans noticed a silhouette between the trees. 'There's someone over there!' he called out.

'Probably a deer,' said Grimm without stopping.

'On two legs?' asked Hans.

Grimm spun round. 'I've heard it said that brats and stooges are sometimes turned into deer,' he snapped. 'So watch out.'

The other robbers followed him out into the open, laughing.

The cornfields of Flutwedde stretched away in front of them. They followed the track where the mouse had been nibbling at the ear of corn.

When they had gone half a mile, Hans saw the figure again – it darted into a coppice nearby that stood on a hill in the middle of a field.

'There it is again,' he said and pointed towards the trees.

Grimm glared at him. 'If you're wrong I'll beat you black and blue,' he growled.

'Go and take a look.' He waved two men on, who crept through the corn towards the trees, their swords drawn.

'Perhaps it's a spy from the Gografs,' suggested one of the robbers.

'Don't you know that the Gograf fort has been surrounded by briars as high as the battlements since the last full moon?,' said another. 'And that everyone inside is sleeping like the dead.'

'Must be a magic spell.'

'Sure. But whose magic?'

'Makes no difference,' replied one of the older robbers. 'It's golden times for us robbers, since not even the Gografs will cross us.'

A cry then went up: 'We've got them!'

The robbers rushed to the coppice. They could hardly believe their eyes when they

saw it was a girl.

'Well now, who have we got here?' asked Grimm. 'Do you want to be our washerwoman or our cook, little one?'

The men sniggered. Only Hans remained silent for the girl was even younger than him. Her hair was honey-coloured, her eyes were green as springtime, and her face was covered in freckles. As he knew his mates didn't waste time messing about, he shifted nervously from one foot to the other.

'Judging by the way she looks, she certainly can't cook,' said one.

'Or do the washing,' said another.

'Maybe she's got other talents,' called a third.

Grimm felt in the leather bag that hung from the girl's belt. 'Knitting,' he said scornfully. 'Woollen shirts.'

The robbers laughed again. 'So she can knit,' called a fourth. 'Very good, the winter's only an autumn away.'

'What's your name, little one?' asked Grimm.

The girl said nothing.

'Tell us your name,' repeated Grimm, whose temper was beginning to rise.

The girl looked at the robbers one by one, and then let the gaze from her green eyes rest on Hans. She seemed to believe that the world and people were good and that no harm would come to her. Wrong, thought Hans.

Then two birds landed on her shoulders, a sparrow on the right and a siskin on the left.

'Let her go,' begged Hans.

'I want to know her name,' roared Grimm. 'I want to know what she's doing here, and who her wretched mother is, and why her damned father hasn't tanned her hide. For that's exactly what I'm going to do, if she doesn't open her mouth this minute.'

The leaves of the poplars rustled in the wind. They seemed to whisper a warning.

Still the girl said nothing.

'As you like, little one,' hissed Grimm.

Two men tied the girl to a poplar and tore the dress off her back.

'Just beat her a little,' ordered Grimm. 'Urs?'

Urs, an obedient giant of a man, drew the whip from his belt.

Then one of the robbers cried out: 'What's that there?' He pointed at the girl's back that was covered from her shoulders to her hips with a mysterious interlocking pattern.

'Looks like a map,' said a second robber.

'Or a route to hidden treasure,' whispered a third.'

'A key to treasure on human skin!' wheezed a fourth.

'A key to treasure?' sneered Grimm. 'Feel free to rip her skin off if you like, and then go hunting, but finish her off first.'

Hans moved away. He didn't want to be there when they beat the girl. She reminded him of his sister Grete, whom he hadn't seen for seven years; he didn't even know if she was still alive. She had had a hard, loveless childhood, and her penniless parents had tried more than once to leave her abandoned in the woods. On the third attempt they succeeded, and Hans and his sister fell into a trap laid by a witch in the Loh forest, which they only just managed to escape from. He tried to banish the memory, and looked round for his mates. Urs acted out a few trial blows with his whip; he wasn't bright, but he could split a maple leaf in half, held by someone in their four fingers. After a while when the girl had still not uttered a sound, Grimm, by now incandescent with rage, ordered him to give the girl the full works.

Hans became aware that all around him everything had fallen silent –the birds had stopped singing, the wind had dropped, and the leaves had stopped rustling. And as he turned round once again, it happened: Just as Urs was about to strike, there was a dazzling flash of light and grass green flames rolled over the robbers. Tree trunks, branches, and poplar leaves flared up and burst into flame. Corn and grass caught alight. The earth was on fire. Hans was blown over by a glowing blast of hot air. He saw Grimm swaying among the trees like a human torch. Sparks and ashes were flying about. Screams pierced the air. Men on fire were beating their arms like flightless chickens, until heat and smoked robbed them of their senses. They swayed,

crashed to the ground, billowing smoke, and ceased to move.

Everything turned black in front of Hans's eyes. He fell into a faint, more like death than sleep.

When he opened his eyes a cloud of midges was swirling above him. He drew a rattling breath. The air stank of burned timber and scorched flesh. His hair was singed, coat and hose, jerkin and boots were covered with burn holes. He thrust his sword into the earth, and pulled himself up by it – and was terrified, for all around him was a scene of devastation. The meadow was covered in ash, the poplars had swelled out, flames were licking at blackened corpses.

In a flash his memory returned.

The girl...

His mates had burned to death, every single one of them.

He stumbled across the meadow. The sight of his dead friends brought tears to his eyes. The girl seemed to have disappeared into thin air, for he couldn't find any trace of her. Just the ropes curling up like snakes in front of the charred poplar. Was she a witch? Did any man who wished her harm burn to death? Was he still alive because he hadn't done anything to her, not even in his thoughts, and had shirked the whipping? He couldn't help thinking of her green eyes – the fire had been the same colour. He fought back the tears, and looked around him. He was all on his own. Alone with death, alone in the devastation. There was not even any sun to offer comfort or hope.

Then he detected footprints in the ashes, leading to the edge of the Au forest. One of his mates must have got away. With a last look at the dead robbers that had been like a family to him, he pulled himself together and followed the footprints. They ended at the bank of the Usse river. Hans cupped his hands around his mouth and called out, but no one answered. Finally he saw a body downstream, caught in the branches of a weeping willow. He ran towards it and realised it was Grimm. He must have thrown himself into the Usse to extinguish the flames and then died from exhaustion. So all



of them were dead....

Hans stood there in a daze. He followed the river bank, stumbled over roots, staggered through reeds. Just before he reached the ford he broke down. He thought he could see three figures on the other bank, an old man, a woman and a goblin, but before he could call out or wave, he fell into a faint.

When Hans came to, he found himself lying under a bearskin on a straw mattress. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked around him in confusion. It was a small, low-ceilinged room. Bunches of herbs hung from the wooden beams and animal skulls decorated the walls. An old woman was sitting by the chimney, where a pot was steaming over the fire. She was wearing a black dress covered in patches, and as she turned to him, Hans thought he saw beneath her bonnet red glowing eyes in her wizened face. Hans froze, and there was only one thought in his mind – *get away from here!* He tore off the bearskin, got to his feet, with his legs buckling under him like straws, and tumbled out of the door into the open. In the light of the full moon he saw that the cottage was surrounded by elders. His gaze shifted across the roof and outer walls –not made of gingerbread and sugar, but wood and thatch. All the same he was overcome with panic, like the green fire, in which his mates had burned to death, and images flashed across his inner eyes – the deep forest, the straw-lined cage; the bars of the cage; the witch, pushing scraps of roasted and boiled meat through the flap; his flagging sister hauling wood and water to the hut; the thin chicken bones he held out to the witch.

The wind cooled his burning forehead, but fear did not leave him. As he turned round

to face the old woman, she was still sitting by the chimney. She beckoned him with a crooked finger.

‘Come in, boy,’ said she. ‘I’ve been taking care of you for seven days. Are you going to let yourself die of fever now?’

Hans tried to conquer his fear. ‘Taking care of me?’ he muttered. ‘For seven days?’

The old woman took a wooden spoon and ladled some soup into a bowl that she

placed beside the pile of straw. 'Why do you want to run away?' she asked.

'Are you afraid of getting burned? Like your companions?'

'How do you know about that?' asked Hans and tottered towards his bed. The straw rustled as he fell down on it.

'I was out collecting herbs, but all I found was dead bodies. You were lying there as good as dead by the ford, my boy. That was where I collected you.'

She plugged a pipe. 'I'm the Old Auntie. The guardian of the elderberry grove.'

Hans reached for the bowl. 'I'm frightened of closed-in spaces, because when I was a child a witch locked me up in the Loh forest, to force feed me so that she could eat me later,' he told her and looked around the cottage fearfully. 'It was my sister that saved me.'

'In Flutwedde there are no witches,' replied the Auntie.

'When I used to be a robber, I would always be out in the open. I enjoyed that – no walls, no doors, no locks.' He drank a spoonful of soup. 'Mm... Chicken soup,' he said with his mouth full.

The old crone filled a glass with a clear liquid. 'Didn't you go back to your parents then?' she asked.

'They had turned us out into the forest,' replied Hans angry and downcast. 'I hate them. Meanwhile they're dead, and I don't know what became of her'

'Of the witch?'

'No, of my sister. The witch burned to death.'

The crone took the pipe out of her mouth and spat into the embers. 'Burned as well?,' she asked. Then she handed him the glass. 'Elderberry brandy. Drink this and you'll live till a hundred.' She winked at him.

Hans drank the brandy, finished off the chicken broth, covered himself with the bearskin and went back to sleep.

The next morning he felt better. He had dreamed of the girl with the green eyes and the mysterious pattern on her back. As he could not understand what had happened, he decided to tell the old woman everything.

The old crone was sitting outside on a bench in the sunshine, smoking a pipe and

gazing at the elderberry bushes. The shadows of leaves and sunspots were dancing on the grove. As Hans sat down beside her, she declared: 'The elderberry tree is sacred. It must not be cut down or burned. I am its guardian – a duty that has been handed down from one woman to another for generations. Unfortunately I am the last, as I have no descendants.'

'My father considered elderberry trees to be weeds,' said Hans who was staring down into his lap.

The old woman turned her face under her bonnet to him and asked:

'Is there something bothering you?'

Hans made an effort and told her about the girl. At the mention of the pattern on her back, she pricked up her ears. 'And the poor creature didn't say a thing?' she asked.

'Not a word. She didn't even scream.'

'No sign of fear?'

Hans thought for a moment. 'She was calm itself,' he then said.

The old woman picked up her stick and went into the cottage.

Hans followed her. He saw her take down a book from the shelf and heave it onto a tall reading stand. She leafed through the leathery pages. Then she said, 'A shepherd who passed by with his flock recently told me about this girl. She conjured up the missing leg of a crippled boy, she brewed a love potion for a maid that wanted to marry a farm hand, and she rescued a brother and sister that had been led astray by will-o-the-wisps and trapped. She performs many good deeds.'

'My companions burned to death in her fire,' said Hans with a lump in his throat.

The old woman nodded. 'Yes but they wanted to do her harm.'

The sunlight fell through the dusty window and made the spiders' webs in the corners glitter. Hans began to cry, for he couldn't help thinking of Grimm who had drowned, and he missed his friends.

'Tears heal the soul,' murmured the old woman. She filled her pipe and lit it with a pinewood spill. 'This is the Kryptonicon,' she said, tapping the book. 'It contains prophecies, magic and curses and tells of time before time and the world beneath the world. Here...' – she said and leafed through it, 'is a picture of an ash tree, that holds

up our world and is tended by the three blind fairies. And here...’ she continued turning the pages ‘ you can see the Karontids, monsters of the underworld, who have only evil in mind.’ She bit grimly on the stem of her pipe.

Hans wiped away his tears and looked at the picture. The Karontids were bigger than a bear; they were bald, and they had yellow eyes and a tail; their breasts and feet ended in pointed thorns that curled upwards. They looked as if they could tear a man to pieces with their paws. ‘Do they really exist?’ he asked.

‘Of course,’ hissed the crone, ‘the Kryptonomikon never lies.’

‘Where is this ash tree supposed to be? I’ve been all over Pinafor, but I’ve never seen it.’

The old woman stared at him, her pupils as large as a cat’s by night. ‘There’s something not quite right in Pinafor, my boy. People are drowning in gold of shady origins. Men no longer work, mothers let their children run wild. A grove of thorns surrounds the Gografs’ castle, and all those inside have fallen into a deep slumber. There’s no one to see to law and order, let alone good manners.’

‘I know,’ said Hans in embarrassment. ‘We’ve never got away with as much as we did this summer. And no one pursued us – neither bailiffs or knights.’ He had to laugh. ‘It was child’s play. The yeomen were mostly drunk. We cleaned them out, and set their houses on fire to say goodbye.’

The old woman gave him a reproachful look. ‘Someone is trying to harm Pinafor,’ she murmured. ‘Someone is attacking the roots of the world – and of the ash tree. If only I knew who was behind it. *What* lies behind it.’ For a long time she remained silent. Then she roused herself from her thoughts and whispered so softly that Hans could barely make out what she said: ‘The king...’

‘Where is this ash tree?’ he asked again.

‘That no one knows, my boy. There’s no hint of it in the Kryptonomicon. But....’ - She raised her index finger – ‘it does mention the girl.’ The old woman turned the book’s stiff pages. She muttered to herself, and spat from the corner of her mouth on to the earthen floor. Then she read out loud, ‘“A maiden with a moonlit countenance and eyes as green as grass in the springtime. A maiden like the star- sprinkled sky at

night. A maiden, whose back..." ' she looked up at Hans, ' "...points the way to the ash-tree, that holds up our world. She will appear in the hour of need.

She is as beautiful as a flower and silent as a fish. A wise man will find her by the river banks at night. He will make her speak with the most brilliant of the stars." ' 'Yes,' said Hans in astonishment. 'That's her.'

'You must find her,' said the old woman.

Hans turned back to the wall on which the bison's skull was hanging. 'Me? he gasped. 'Why me of all people? She was the one that killed my friends.'

'Bah', was the old woman's response. 'Robbers and murderers. Seems to me like Very fine friends they seem to me. Don't you understand what's at stake here? You're the one who could help – yes, you could do penance for the thieving life you have led, by carrying out a good and noble deed.'

'I would only look for the girl in order to avenge my friends,' retorted Hans defiantly. 'Apart from which I'm the son of a woodcutter and his hard-hearted wife. I'm not made for great deeds.'

'Who knows? You've been a robber with heart as black as pitch, but it could be as white as snow. A wise person is one who questions themselves. Stupid – and sometimes wicked people – are those who look in the mirror and see only what they want to see.'

The old woman closed the book. 'We're going to go and visit the thirteen wise women,' she said firmly. 'They're the ones that advise the Gogرافs. They will help us.' She tied up her bundle, took her stick and stepped out of the door into the light of day.

Hans looked back at the bison's skull, which returned his gaze from empty eye sockets. His head was spinning. What was he to do? In the end he fastened on his sword, took up his coat and followed the old woman. In his entire life he had received little affection, let alone love, and after his sister disappeared and Grimm and his companions had died, the old woman remained the only person he still had. She had cared for him and seemed to be concerned for him. Once outside, when he looked around again he saw a large number of cats sitting in front of the cottage, miaowing by way of farewell.

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‘Those are my faithful guardians,’ called the old women who had already passed to the other side of the elderberry grove.  
Hans hurried to catch up with her.