

THE CURSE OF THE PETTY-DWARVES

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IN the events of chapter 21 of 'The Silmarillion', of 'Túrin Turambar', we can trace the working of two curses that are specifically mentioned in the book: Morgoth's curse on the family of Hurin, and the Doom of the Noldor.

In addition to these, I think I can detect the influence of a third curse which, perhaps significantly, is not actually mentioned in its own right. We are told (p.204) that the Petty-Dwarves were banished by their people and became "diminished", but no reason for this is given. From such of their history as is told, or implied, in 'The Silmarillion', I would guess that they were of old a great and highly respected family, but that their fame went to their heads until their pride became so insufferable (or led them into such serious crime) that the King of the city where they dwelt punished them, not only with exile but with the curse of insignificance, prophesying that never again would anyone take notice of them or consider them of any importance.

They travelled far away across the Blue Mountains, partly because they were exiled from their own city and no other tribe of dwarves would take them for fear of becoming involved in the curse, and partly no doubt, like Túrin in Nargothrond, in the hope of escaping their doom by starting a life somewhere where they, and it, were not known. But that very fact may have been their undoing, for the Elves of Beleriand seem not even to have recognised them for speaking people, and hunted them like beasts, so that to save their lives they must themselves bring the curse to pass, living furtively and taking pains not to be noticed. Not until other Dwarves came into Beleriand did the Elves understand what these earlier arrivals were and cease to hunt them, only to fulfil the curse in another way, giving them the name of "Petty-Dwarves", so that any who heard of them would know, even in their hearing, that they were of no importance.

After a time there came a stroke of luck by which it must have seemed that their fortunes could be restored. They discovered under the High Faroth a complex of caves that offered an ideal site for a Dwarf-city such as they had known before their exile: a fortress against their enemies where they could dwell in peace and not like hunted beasts; forges and workshops wherein to revive and perfect the skills that were already rusting for want of leisure to

practise them; stately halls where they could once again live in dignity and pride; safe treasuries for the wealth they may now begin to accumulate; and an achievement which would win them undying fame as founders of the first Dwarf-city west of the Ered Luin. At the worst, even if the curse pursued them so that at last their tribe died out, the deserted ruins of the great city of Nulukizdfn would remain to preserve the memories of its founders. But some disaster, we know not what, stopped the work when it was scarcely begun, and the delvers, or those of them that survived, withdrew to small and obscure dwellings such as Amon Rûdh. Later, the Elves discovered those caves; the works of the Noldor aided by the strong and wealthy Dwarf-tribes of Gabilgathol and Tumunzahar obliterated the last traces of the abortive work of the Petty-Dwarves, and when the place became famous it was as the Elvish city of Nargothrond. Probably not even their fellow Dwarves ever knew it by the name its first founders gave to it, for the Petty-Dwarves, who shunned and were shunned even by their own kind, would have had no opportunity to tell them of it, and the mansions the folk of Nogrod and Belegost helped to make received from them a new name in the Khuzdul tongue.

As the years went by their numbers continued to dwindle, for when we next hear of them only three remain, and of those one is shot by Túrin's outlaws, more casually than many a man would shoot a rabbit. Túrin himself, we are told (p.200), "forsook... war and plunder against all save the servants of Angband", but among his followers it seems that old habits die hard. (Or had the Petty-Dwarves ever served the Enemy? Was this perhaps the crime for which they had been exiled?)

But now once again, though in a far smaller way, it began to look as if the fate of the tribe might be changing, or at least relenting a little. Mîm sacrificed his safe obscurity to save his life (and gave himself at least a temporary importance in the eyes of a little band of outcasts by offering them something they needed which no-one else could give). Túrin "looked long on the Dwarf" - possibly the only person outside his own family that had ever done so - and decided to trust him. Was there perhaps an instinctive sympathy between one doomed victim and another? At any rate, the first tentative beginnings of a short-lived friendship seemed to have sprung up even between Túrin and Mîm. When the outlaws were admitted into Bar-en-Danedh more than one of them must have seen how their host left them hurriedly, as if in trouble, yet only Túrin was sufficiently interested to investigate, and when he showed pity for Mîm's bereavement, Mîm replied, not with reproaches against the Man who, in theory at least, commanded his son's slayers and was therefore responsible for his death, but with a simple statement of facts. To Mîm's astonishment Túrin spoke "like a Dwarf-Lord of old", that is, with the consideration and respect that Dwarf-Lords used to show to Mîm's forefathers in the days before there was enmity between them.

His tribe would soon be extinct unless Ibum were to marry, which was unlikely for no Dwarvish father would bestow his rare, and therefore valuable, daughter on a suitor with so little to offer;* the caves that were to have been their palace and their memorial had been taken by another; and now, when all

*The Petty-Dwarves must have had this same problem ever since their exile and interbreeding probably contributed to their degeneration.

seemed darkest, someone had actually shown concern for them, and was willing to listen to their history, so that at least a memory of them would survive. Perhaps Mîm pictured Túrin some day, settled down and married, amusing his children, and later his grandchildren, with tales of his outlaw days, when he dwelt in the cunningly hidden refuge of the Last of the Petty-Dwarves. (What were they, Grandfather?) And so he would tell them, and perhaps they in turn would tell their grandchildren, and his people's former glory, and their fall, and the slow advance of their doom, would become a matter of legend, passed down by succeeding generations of men.

These tales Túrin heard "sitting with him alone", which implies that none of the other outlaws thought him worth listening to. We could hardly blame them for being unwilling to sit through Mîm's long tale of bitterness, long-fermented grudges, and the ramblings of old age, were it not that, as their host, he was entitled to some attention. For his offer had only been to allow them to use his house as a hideout, not to hand it over to them altogether. Even Túrin seems not to have remembered this. The agreement had been made with Túrin and those men who were of his band at the time, yet when Beleg rejoined them they brought him back to Bar-en-Danedh without, apparently, thinking to ask Mîm's permission. And Beleg was not a man, but an Elf. Little wonder that Mîm resented his moving in! Moreover, with Beleg's coming the Petty-Dwarves were once again completely overlooked, even in their own halls.

So, although he could not be glad to be captured by Orcs, Mîm was not sorry for the opportunity to revenge himself on the usurpers of his home by re-asserting his right to invite to it whoever he chose. Túrin himself he could not wholly betray, but he made only a token resistance to the temptation, for he cannot have placed much reliance on an Orc's promise. Even so, his vengeance was incomplete, for the one he most hated survived, his own attempt to finish the Orc's work failed, and it was with Beleg's curse added to the one he already bore that Mîm left the last stronghold of his people, which even he now called by a name in the Elvish tongue.

Túrin after his rescue from the Orcs came and dwelt in Nargothrond, not so far from Amon Rûdh, but we do not read that it ever entered his head to seek out Mîm, although he had two good reasons for doing so.

Orodreth held him in high honour, and gave him costly Dwarf-mail. Doubtless he gave him other treasures as well, or would have done if Túrin had need of them, for instance, if he had thought to pay the promised weregild for Khîm. As it turned out, Túrin was able to pay this debt without resorting to the strange and unprecedented behaviour of actually remembering a Petty-Dwarf, for it was he who instigated the building of the bridge over the Narog by which Glarung and the Orcs were able to enter Nargothrond, and it was he who later killed the dragon, so that Nargothrond was left empty and Mîm was able to take possession of its treasures. No Dwarf could fail to find pleasure in handling and owning beautiful works of craftsmanship but it must have been a bitter pleasure for Mîm, for his people had "diminished... in smithcraft" and such jewels as the Nauglamír, which the Dwarves of Nogrod afterwards saw as a proud example of the craft of their forefathers, were for him a cruel reminder of a standard of skill which his tribe had long ago lost.

Nor did Túrin trouble to take vengeance on Mîm for his betrayal and the death of his companions. On his death this debt, if debt it were, was inherited by his father as the nearest surviving kinsman, but when Húrin came to Nargothrond it was only for the Nauglamír, for he was surprised to find Mîm there. On his way he had passed Amon Rúdh, and "knew what had befallen there", but he did not turn aside to look for Mîm, and when he took the vengeance Beleg had foretold it was as a mere incidental, for which it would not have been worthwhile going out of the way.

The Petty-Dwarves were remembered, so Mîm told Túrin, "in ancient tales of Doriath and Nargothrond". By the time of Mîm's death Nargothrond had already fallen, and Doriath did not last long afterwards. Finally even the lands where the Petty-Dwarves had lived were sunk beneath the sea in the cataclysm when Númenor foundered. A record of their existence survived only in the Narn i Hîn Húrin, which itself probably survives now only in an abridged form within the Silmarillion, and there, typically, they appear as only minor characters, for those tales were preserved by Men and Elves, and Dwarves come into them only in regard to their dealings with other races. Little background is given even about the folk of Nogrod and Belegost, and if Dírhavel knew anything more about the Petty-Dwarves then either he, or the Elvish editors of the 'Silmarillion', or perhaps even Professor Tolkien himself as translator, did not think it important enough to pass on. We are not told from which of the Seven Fathers of the Dwarves they traced their descent, why they were exiled, nor from where, except that they came from East of the Blue Mountains; nor what calamity or series of calamities stopped the delving of Nulukkidîn and reduced their numbers to only three. We do not even know what became of Ibun except that, as his words to Húrin, "I am the last of my people" indicate, Mîm outlived him. Apart from this the last we hear of him is when he and Mîm are taken by the Orcs, and he is not with his father on the hilltop after the massacre. Was his life included in the bargain with their captors, or had they already killed him? And if the Orcs agreed to spare him, did they keep their word? We cannot tell. He dies as he had lived, in the obscurity to which his people were doomed. I only hope I have not brought some remnant of their ill-luck upon myself in defying the curse by devoting the whole article to them.