

# THE CHANGELING - a short story

by Jim Johnstone



WO shadows bulked against lesser, maculated shadows of trees. Both men were facing the East, waiting for dawn to shine on shattered mail and cold corpses. Beyond them horses stirred and rattled harness, their breath steaming in the chill air of morning. One man stirred and spoke:

"What will you have done with the child?"

The other sighed and set his hand on his sword-hilt - a reply eloquent enough.

"Háma, is that how you repay your weregild?" asked the first, resting his mailed hand on the other's clenched fingers.

Háma shook his hand away and drew his straight steel sword and studied its keen edge abstractedly. He spoke slowly, pronouncing as if it were a death sentence, "It was an accident, he did it inadvertently."

"Why do you not spare him - inadvertently?" the urging voice was soft, as his eyes too were drawn to the shimmer of the blade. It flickered with an almost-ghost of a blue flame.

"We will let the omens of the dawn decide for us" and he rested the sword point on his mailed toe.

"What you are doing is pointless, Háma. You are sheering away from the decision yourself. Every man - every warrior - must make his own decisions - not let the outcome be decided by the roll of bones or omens. Do you hope to escape guilt if the 'omens' tell you the child must die?" He looked to the lightning sky. The dimness that was Mirkwood was sheathed in mists that rose in changeling spires. With the haze this morning he wondered how his companion would divine omens from a misty sky.

He took a step forward and to the side, confronting Háma's naked blade and rested his hand on the hilt. His stern eyes caught the other's and they stood mute for long moments, measured in heartbeats, wrestling wills.

At last Háma looked away. He surveyed the mysterious forest, then looked down at his sword. "There is no alternative. The child deserves nothing -"

"You would deny him even mercy?"

"Mercy!" spat Háma, the word in that context foul. "What do his kind know of mercy?" He tried to raise his sword but the other restrained him.

"There is an alternative. You but wish to disregard it."

"What is it?" queried Háma, suspiciously, knowing the answer but dreading it being used against him.

"First of all; he is a waif. He is starved at the moment but he will grow strong. He would be a strong warrior, worthy to ride to a muster of the Rohirrim. All he needs is schooling in the arts of war and in the history of Middle-earth and there is another warrior to fight against the forces of the shadow in the East."

The voice that Háma replied in was fierce, low and furious; "Your helm is dented. Did you take a head-blow in the skirmish last night? Come with me!" And he started to walk towards the horses, where their captive was bound: waiting for execution or freedom.

The men fell silent as they approached. Most were on foot, building a pyre. A few were on horseback as sentries. All seemed to bear the responsibility for the answering of the seemingly insoluble riddle that lay before their captains.

The boy lay huddled in a blanket and the dew shone on his naked skin where it showed through the rags he wore. His teeth chattered and he looked like a wolf; gaunt, starved lean by weeks of privation. His dark eyes flickered from Háma to Thorongil as they dragged him to his feet. His feet were bound in a mass of animal-skin swaddlings.

"You know my sword, Thorongil, do you not?" rasped Háma and his eyes bored into the boy.

"Aye," came Thorongil's grim reply. "It is the work of Westernesse. Stolen from some ancient barrow. How came you by it?"

"You have asked me that before and I have declined to answer. Still, I came by it honourably. I took it from a Dunlending who crossed our Western border. It shines with a witch-light when Orcs are near but for all that it is a worthy blade. It has served me well."

The sword shook in Háma's hand as if straining to drink blood. A nimbus fluttered over its cutting edges - like the blue of veins beneath the skin.

"The blade does not lie! See, the boy is an Orc-spawn and deserves death!"

"Be not so eager to deal death, Háma," murmured Thorongil, almost as if to himself. He straightened and fixed Háma with his eye. "We are surrounded by Orcs, how can the boy escape such a fate! Of course the blade burns blue!"

Háma looked wildly around expecting to see an Orc-horde assailing them. "What does this mean: 'We are surrounded by Orcs?' Aye we are, but all of them dead."

"Precisely," agreed Thorongil, "it proves that the sword does not know

life from death. Lay the sword on my palm."

Háma did so. "See!" hissed Thorongil, "it proves that I too am an Orc!"

Háma stared at Thorongil, his mind working slowly, then he said: "It appears... that the sword cannot tell between live Orcs and dead ones."

"But if you were to take the boy to Edoras and test him with the sword there - and it showed the azure nimbus - what would you do with him then?"

"Why," ejaculated Háma. "Slay him!"

"Be not so hasty with judgement, Háma" warned his friend. "First answer me this: what is an Orc?"

"Why, a servant of the... Enemy."

"And is a man of Rohan, if he turn traitor to his people, so as to league himself with such an enemy - is he an Orc?"

"No - but he deserves the death of an Orc, just the same."

"Maybe. So, then, what is an Orc?"

"A creature of the East."

"You strike nearer the mark, Háma. A creature, you say. How is such a creature made?" There was a pause as Háma pondered; Thorongil chose to answer for him. "Such a creature of the Enemy was first of all an innocent in the beginning. But he is raised to emulate evil, he is trained for treachery, loyal only to malice, kin only to deviousness. And, what have we here? - even if this boy tethered before us is the son of a Chieftain Orc who is the son of a Chieftain Orc for the past thousand generations, he is still not wholly evil, he is still not wholly... the Enemy's."

"Do you know aught of history, Háma? Do you not know that the genesis of all Orcs, Trolls, and other devious creatures was merely the corruption of the races already extant? That is why the boy should be spared. If he is raised by a decent, honest family of Rohan his legacy of Orchood will never surface."

Háma sheathed his sword and looked into the East and said: "The omens of the dawn portend nothing we already know."