

Letters From Abroad:
The Journeys of Evangeline Peppertree
by Evil Dolly (c) 2023
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This is your humble correspondent, Evangeline Peppertree, writing once more of my adventures and exploits in the pursuit of a greater understanding of the world around us.

In my travels far and wide across the lands, there are few among the beasts and creatures which I have encountered that are as filthy or as foul as the harpy. Harpies are well known to be vicious, petty, and cruel, and not given to friendly discourse. Yet I am writing here to record a successful, and surprisingly amenable, first-hand interview with one of their kind. I will also confirm the method of harpy reproduction and once and for all discount the belief that harpies steal seed from human men and hatch baby harpies from eggs (as claimed by Callow in his oft-cited but grossly inaccurate *Encyclopedea of Beasts, Half-men, and Supernatural Beings*).

First, a brief education for my readers on the known nature and habits of harpies. Harpies are rare creatures, seldom seen by most. They typically live in loose, far-flung colonies in mountainous terrain and, occasionally, swampland, roosting on inaccessible cliffs and at the tops of especially tall trees sturdy enough to support their massive nests, such as giant redwoods and elder juniper. Generally solitary creatures, they do socialize with each other and will converge in flocks to combat threats, and there are tales of harpies of the distant Grandethall Steppes who live in large communal nests ruled by a matriarch.

They are born with the gift of magical flight by way “innate enchantment”, as the arcane scholars call it, the same as with other large flying creatures such as dragons and manticores. This perpetual enchantment renders them (along with whatever, or whoever, they are carrying) lighter while in flight than they naturally have a right to be. Harpies are equivalent in weight to large, well-muscled humans and, unlike birds, have solid bones. Without such magics, at best they could only hope to glide. As it stands, they are strong and agile fliers, if not especially swift on the wing.

Harpies, it is said, when they are spoken of at all, are filled with a bottomless well of hatred and disproportionate rage towards all other creatures, and are particularly confrontational with humans. They will fearlessly harass anyone or anything who passes through their perceived territory with tireless verbal assaults and by relieving themselves on intruders with startling accuracy (harpy droppings are notoriously unpleasant). While they may usually settle for verbally haranguing caravans and travelers, they can and do attack those who they see as a threat, such as bands of soldiers or armed adventurers. Thus, it is safer to conceal one’s weapons and at least appear unarmed and harmless when traveling through harpy lands. Still, that doesn’t necessarily mean one is entirely safe; harpies do sometimes abduct women and have been known to rape, and occasionally kill, men they catch alone. It has long been believed that harpies feast upon those they abduct. It is true that in times of famine harpies might eat human flesh, but I will confirm an altogether different fate for the young women they steal away.

Though capable of speech, it is said that harpies are only semi-intelligent (again, Callow, *Encyclopedea of Beasts, et al*) given their violent and extraordinarily vulgar nature, and that they are capable of only meager comprehension and communication. Such talk about the creatures who roam and rule the lands outside the safety of human enclaves always makes me wonder. Can these sorts of creatures not be reasoned with? Can there be no hope of communication? Of fellowship? Questions such as these nag at me and are what set my feet upon the path of exploration and understanding I am on today.

As to the question of reproduction, there has long existed among the rural folk the belief that harpies are made, not hatched, by way of contagious magical infection, like that of lycanthropy. There even exists a folk remedy, in case of physical contact with a harpy, which prescribes a possible cure for cursed contamination, involving slathering oneself from head to toe in duck fat at twilight and rinsing it off with rosewater at noonday. The theory of magical infection has never been proven, since there are

no records of anyone who has sustained injuries from fights with harpies suddenly turning into a harpy themselves. And even the folk tales disagree on how such an infection is transmitted. Some say it is caught from a bite as with lycanthropes, or from being scratched by their talons. Yet there are many who have been scratched and bitten by harpies, and no one has reported so much as a slight transformation or the errant growth of a single feather.

Unlike some self-styled scholars who hold me in disdain, and who remain locked in their studies, writing manuscripts and filling in the gaps in their knowledge by fabricating fallacious facts, I have seldom shied away from putting myself at personal risk for the betterment of wisdom. I just recently found myself in a position to tempt fate and explore the mysteries of the harpies.

By chance, my travels brought me close to the forested foothills not far from the Wretchwind Pass, near a reputed harpy nesting ground. I normally wouldn't have given it a second thought, but some moons prior I had witnessed a largely peaceful interaction between humans and harpies with my own eyes (more on that later), so when I learned that I was indeed within harpy territory, my curiosity was roused and my courage was plucked. Another opportunity to delve into the unknown! One might wonder why I would go out of my way to research harpies. The truth is that little is known for certain about them, what with them being dangerous and unpleasant to study in the wild and utterly intractable in captivity. Any new discovery could only be beneficial.

After preparing and provisioning myself, I skirted the boundaries of a wild forest which surrounded the craggy foothills. With me I brought a plump goat, as I hoped providing free food might prove a peaceful overture, as well as being a potential distraction (or an easier meal) should events not play out in my favor. In my experience, many monsters respond positively to kindness and genuine interest. That does not mean they won't still try to eat you.

I was fortunate, for early in the day I caught sight of the unmistakable form of a harpy circling high above the forest in the distance. I made my way into the trees along an old, ill-kept trail. After some time, I stopped to rest and play my ocarina in a clearing among the tall trees while the goat supped on ivy and red nettles. I was wondering how best to go about attracting the attention of the harpy when I heard a loud rustling and the snapping of twigs from overhead, as from a large creature leaping from treetop to treetop. With a dreadful screech, the canopy sundered and there in the branches above me was a harpy, furious and terrible.

For those who have never beheld a harpy, or who have seen only inaccurate etchings, allow me a moment to describe this particular specimen. She had, as one might expect, the head, torso, and thighs of a tall and athletic woman, middle-aged perhaps, with a bountiful, if sagging, bosom. Her face, when not contorted with rage, was not unattractive, though a shade too stern and weatherworn to be conventionally lovely, and atop her head was a long, tousled mane of seldom-washed dark hair, tangled with twigs and dead leaves. This is where her humanity ends, for instead of arms she had large, feathered wings similar in shape to those of a hawk. Two clawed fingers and a thumb extended from the wrists of her wings, which allow for climbing, grabbing, and simple tool use. She had a feathered tail, short when compared in proportion to the bodies of normal birds. From the knees down were the scaly digitigrade legs and the four long toes of a bird of prey, and—drawing one's gaze and sending a shiver up one's spine—the black, curved talons, strong enough to unhorse a man and sharp enough to puncture most armor. Intimidating in the best of circumstances, and there was I with nothing but a fat goat and an ocarina.

Her back was feathered, as was her posterior, and downy feathers also concealed her nether regions, tapering narrowly in the direction of her navel. Different regional harpy breeds have varying feather placement and color patterns; this harpy had feathers down the outsides of her thighs, though some have fully-feathered thighs, and yet others' thighs are entirely bare. This one's feather coloration was a dull tawny brown, like most harpies. (It is said there was a mage, Fildred the Unwise, who attempted to magically alter a captive harpy to give her the bright colors of a peacock. Fildred succeeded, so the story goes, but was left with grievous injuries along with the loss of his manhood after the outraged and indignant harpy broke free.)

Indeed, this specimen was magnificent in form, but far from glamorous: her body was smudged with dirt and sweat and the trailing feathers of her wings and tail were scraggly and unkempt.

The harpy did not inquire of my name nor ask why I was there. From the moment she spied me, she unleashed an unceasing tirade of threats and curses upon me, such that I was struck dumb and too stunned to speak, a rarity for me I assure you. I had intended to explain my intentions as soon as possible to avoid any misunderstandings (or unfortunate injuries), but when faced with such red-faced fury it was all I could do to cower, much less slip an introductory word in edgewise. Along with the profane verbiage, she occasionally emitted caws which were similar to those of a crow, only much louder and far more harsh. The poor goat bleated and pulled at his tether as the harpy leapt from branch to cracking branch, buffeting me with the musty wind from her beating wings while showering down upon me both leaves and venomous words.

And let me pause here to state that in all of my travelings as a minstrel, and all the times spent in taverns, bawdy houses, merchant caravans and soldier encampments, never have I ever heard foul language used with such spiteful and creative vulgarity as in my single encounter with a harpy. It is truly a wonder of the world.

I finally had no choice but to attempt to shout over her, telling her that I intended no ill, that I only wished for a peaceful dialog, to learn of her ways, and that I had brought the goat as a gift. My friendly overture only seemed to anger her further, and she shriekingly informed me that she could capture her own prey without my help. Nonetheless, she leapt from the branches, pouncing upon the bleating animal, and, in a flurry of feathers, flew up through the canopy and vanished. After some time passed, I thought that my harpy encounter may have concluded, and that I should be myself lucky that she had picked the goat over me. Then, with a series of caws, she returned, lighting upon a branch above me and resuming her vicious assault as though uninterrupted. This continued for the better part of an hour, with the harpy untiringly scolding me, and me standing steadfast (but not entirely uncowed) against her fury.

Finally, at a loss for words, I attempted music. I began to sing the *Kauld uf Fualnen Skare*, a haunting ballad whose lyrics are in a language so old they can only be vaguely translated. Surprisingly, and mercifully, the harpy quieted down and seemed to listen intently to my rendition, which was quite a heartening development. Then, after several long moments of calm once the song was finished, the harpy erupted anew with vitriol, now smirking as she laced into me with taunts, barbs, and personal aspersions, degrading my talent and skills as a bard with the dagger-like precision of the harshest critic. I have faced many hostile crowds before, and one cannot perform without developing a thick skin, but this I was not expecting from a monster in the wild and, as the attacks continued unabated, even I began to doubt my adequacy and self-worth.

There was a shift in her demeanor, however, as she was no longer making threats or warning me off. Instead, she seemed perversely intent on verbally belittling and humiliating me. I couldn't tell if this was a good or ill portent, and I was beginning to think my task hopeless. At long last, she swooped from her perch and planted herself on the ground directly in front of me, her wings spread in unveiled menace, glaring at me with her inhumanly golden brown eyes. She towered above me, what with her tall frame and long, double-jointed legs, and I was unashamedly frightened. Then she asked me quite pointedly, *Misery, morsel! What do you want?*

A break-through, at last? I reintroduced myself and once again offered my entreaty. She appeared baffled and I wasn't sure if she understood my meaning at first. She stalked around me with a speculative eye, and finally offered to take me someplace where we could talk. I admit some misgivings at this point, but this was, after all, what I had wanted, and one cannot explore the unknown without first braving it. In a thrice, she had seized me in her talons and, with the powerful beating of her wings, carried me aloft over the treetops. I clung to her scaly legs; I would like to say the experience of flight was exhilarating but, in truth, I was terrified of being dashed to the ground far below—depending solely upon the strength of her grip as well as her questionable capacity for mercy.

Allow me, at this point, a digression to explain why I had a curiosity about harpies when there are so many other (and far more pleasant) beings with which to attempt dialog in the land. Why believe that I could successfully commune with a harpy, at all? Well, it so happened that some months prior I had taken passage on a merchant caravan traveling the sparsely populated trade route which skirts around

the northern spur of the Laughing Mountains, on my way to tour the towns along the northwest coast. The caravan master announced a detour to trade for goods at certain village along the way, and my ears perked when I heard a rumor that the village had formed some sort of equitable arrangement with the local harpy flock. Surely, this was worthy of a brief sojourn!

I found the somewhat insular village of Goldwell nestled among fields thick with purple flowers and yellow wheat. The isolated village's main trade is in the production of bee honey and milk thistle. Now, communities and farmsteads so close to harpy territory would normally be harassed and raided by them at will, but, after adjusting to the local dialect, and after winning the affections of a local milkmaid by way of serenade, I learned that their ancestors used diplomacy to forge a sort of peace with the ill-tempered harpies. Once I had allayed the suspicions of the village elders in regards to my intentions—that I was there purely for personal research—they allowed me to view an annual holiday which the village has held for over a hundred years. I was in luck to have arrived just in time, as it was being held a fortnight hence.

The holiday, held in the early spring, featured tables laden with roast geese, baked winter squash, milk thistle salad, and honey (so much honey), along with the midday imbibing, songs, and communal dancing which are typical of rural fertility celebrations. What came after was not typical: a procession of four young women from the village, each clad in a simple white shift and quite drunk on mead. Around their necks were hung garlands made of hollowed-out goose eggs dyed in bright colors. Among them, to my great surprise, was the very milkmaid with whom I had spent a pleasant afternoon only days prior. She had made no mention that she had a pivotal role in the celebration.

Laughing children tossed fistfuls of goose down into the air as the procession made its way to the field that separated the little town and the mountain forest. Only then did I see the harpies that were perching among the trees. I had not noticed them earlier, as they had been waiting with uncharacteristic silence and patience. The girls were lined up; one was weeping, one was gazing dully back at the crowd, one looked somewhat nauseous, and the last—my milkmaid—was giggling drunkenly to herself. At once the waiting harpies took to the air and swooped toward the village's offering. The exchange was peaceful, apart from a few moments when the young women were knocked about and slapped with wing tips during some extremely loud and tempestuous squabbles between several of the harpies over who would get the offering of her choice. The harpies seized their prizes and carried them up into the air and over the forest. One of the colorful goose egg garlands fell from high to land in the grass, where one of the cheering village children ran over to fetch it up and twirl it overhead.

It seems that in return for the yearly gift of young women, along with the occasional goat or pig, the harpies keep the isolated village and merchant road safe from brigands and highwaymen while leaving the village in peace. Such mutually beneficial relationships between humans and magical beings are not unheard of, but this is the only one involving harpies that I have discovered and it may well be unique. It is not my place to judge the traditions and rites of the villagers, and it does appear to work well for them, but I do wonder if they are fully aware of the nature of the fate to which they are consigning their daughters.

To return to the harrowing flight: I did not have to endure it for long, for she flew with intent, and we were soon gliding through a forested canyon with rocky cliffs on either side. Our destination was a singularly tall elder juniper growing up from the canopy. Near the top was a massive nest built amongst several thick branches splayed like a gnarled hand. We ascended up to the nest and she deposited me onto its edge with surprising carefulness.

The first thing to strike me was the smell. In spite of my being a bard, I lack the words to adequately describe the overpowering melange of unpleasant odors.

The nest was a dense tangle of sticks and branches in the shape of a broad, shallow bowl, quite spacious, and lined with a thick soft layer of mouldering gray grasses. Littered among the sticks and grass were droppings, loose feathers, scraps of blue fabric, and a scattering of animal skulls and bones. Draped over the large branches jutting up through and around the nest were whole animal skeletons held together with sinew and dangling like morbid wind chimes. Among these was the goat, already disemboweled and left to bleed out (I learned that the harpy liked to let her meat age a bit). I do not

think I saw any human bones in the mix, but I couldn't be positive. The overall impression was that it was part bed and part compost pile. It was difficult, to say the least, to find somewhere comfortable to sit, since I had a powerful reluctance to actually touch anything. I did not wish to appear rude, however, so I made myself as comfortable as I could.

The most startling feature of the nest, however, was that it was not unoccupied. Off to the side, half buried in the hay, was a nude, golden-haired maiden, wrists bound facing and tethered to one of the large branches with a length of frayed rope. Her bruised skin was marked with long scratches and streaked with filth and little bits of down that had adhered to her. She appeared as surprised to see me there as I her, and she immediately hid her face in her arms and tried to bury herself deeper in the nest. I thought my best course of action was to take my cue from the harpy, who had barely cast her a glance, and behave as though the young lady wasn't there.

What followed was a most bizarre dialog, halting at first due to the harpy's suspiciousness and my anxiety, but which gradually became more relaxed. The harpy didn't give me her name—she felt I was undeserving to know it. To break the ice I described myself in greater detail and went on to recount a few of my more interesting tales. She actually listened politely with a minimum of profane interjections, but I got the feeling she wasn't overly interested in who I was. Her overall attitude towards me was one of superiority and condescension, as though she was royalty and I but a wretched peasant to whom she had granted an audience, which was at odds with her comportment and surroundings. I never did discover where this sense of supremacy came from in a creature who is unabashedly, almost defiantly, repellent, and who is, in many ways, the polar opposite of sanctitude. I suspect it must be inborn.

She did, however, confirm the theory of her origins: she had in fact, once upon a time, been human! She had not been born of an egg at all. I asked if she remembered her previous life, her home, her parents. *Only in dreams*, was her somewhat poignant, if vague, reply. She recalled trying to visit her old home once long ago; she had gotten lost along the way and ended up unintentionally terrorizing a random farmer's family by her sudden appearance, and then by slaughtering their pig out of sheer vexation. In reference to Callow's assertions about harpy intelligence, I asked her if she had felt any diminution in her cognition after becoming a harpy. Her expression of disgust told me all I needed to know, so I let the matter drop.

I didn't get a clear explanation in regards to harpies' antagonistic behavior towards humans and other creatures. The best explanation I got was that it is a compulsion. And that she hates intruders. I felt the answer overly simplistic and evasive, considering the apparent delight she had taken from verbally humiliating me earlier in our encounter, but that was all I was able to extract from her. So I inquired about her motivations. What makes her tick? What do harpies enjoy?

Fighting, feasting, fucking, she replied with a smirk. Ideally, it would seem, simultaneously.

At this point during the conversation she hopped up onto the rim of the nest, lifted her tail, and quite casually relieved herself over the edge without batting an eye. I will say it is a unique form of discomfort to have someone relieve themselves while maintaining eye contact with you. And, for those with a morbid curiosity, and I do not judge you, harpies are indeed possessed of but a single, all-purpose orifice in their nethers, a cloaca in the manner of birds, concealed by their feathers. I will admit some curiosity in regards to comparative anatomy myself, and might have asked permission for an examination in the interest of furthering my knowledge and familiarizing myself with the matter at hand, but, in all honesty, I couldn't bring myself to pose the question for reasons of hygiene had she actually consented.

I described for her the ceremony I had witnessed in the village of Goldwell, and I asked her opinion of the peaceful relationship which had developed between the people and the local harpies. She cawed loudly, finding it hilarious. She disdainfully asserted that those harpies had grown lazy and complacent; a proper harpy should hunt and claim a chick on her own.

A chick? I wondered aloud.

The harpy flapped her wings and moved to perch on the edge of the nest above the naked young lady, who was still hiding her face and lying in the hay with her back to me. *Mine I took only weeks ago*, said the harpy. She went on to describe how she had flown all the way to the far side of the mountains in search of the right chick. She spotted her among a group of noble women strolling

through the gardens of some minor castle estate. The harpy had swooped down with screech and plucked her up as easily as if she was a dozing bunny. At this, I gave a closer inspection of the blue fabric scattered about the nest—blue satin, embroidered, almost surely the remnants of an expensive gown.

She explained that her chick should be fully feathered by winter. By next spring, she would be ready to fly. I learned that a harpy can take only one chick at a time, so she devotes all of her attention to the one. She looked down upon her chick as she spoke, her expression alternating between motherly and predatory. A strange contrast: at one moment a gentle stroking and brushing of the girl with her wingtips, and the next moment the sliding of deadly black talons across cringing bare skin. Abruptly, she announced that it was feeding time, and she hopped down and roughly the flipped the girl onto her back. The girl made weak and beleaguered protests as the harpy pinned her down with a clawed foot on her midsection. With her clawed wing-fingers, she held the girl's head in place and pried her mouth open wide.

I have been witness to much, and am possessed of a singular imagination, and at the announcement of feeding I confess I had expected, perhaps, a breast feeding (the harpy had, after all, capacious mammaries). I had not, however, expected to her to feed her chick in the manner of bird—by vomiting directly into the young lady's open mouth. The girl gagged and struggled, but she did swallow dutifully. Judging from the scratches on her body, she had learned not to refuse her meals.

I felt somewhat queasy and was thankful I hadn't recently eaten. Yet it was strangely intimate to behold. And enlightening! I formed the theory that, as with lycanthropes and their cursed bites, the magical contagion is transmitted through the saliva or some other digestive fluid of harpies. But, instead of a single bite, harpy-ism is more gradual, progressively transforming the chick over the course of many months of regular feedings.

Once the meal was finished, the harpy fluffed out her feathers and regally seated herself directly upon the head and chest of the young woman like a hen sitting on her eggs. She began to preen, brushing out her feathers and de-tangling her hair somewhat ineffectually. We continued our conversation over the muffled cries and choking sounds coming from the squirming girl. I wondered whether the harpy was perhaps doing this to shock me, but her expression told that this was normal behavior. She then bid me to play for her chick, who, the harpy supposed, must have been starved for the cultural entertainments she had once been accustomed to.

A strange audience, though not the strangest for whom I have performed. I took out my ocarina and played *Lithault's Homecoming*, a mellow instrumental well-suited for pipes. To my great surprise, the harpy attempted to mimic the notes almost like a songbird. It was imperfect, but I had no idea harpy throats were capable of any melody whatsoever.

After the performance, I probed for more information on the details of how a person becomes a harpy. The harpy grinned in a manner that was almost as unsettling as her initial anger. In a glib tone that I'm sure she thought sounded sincere, she spoke of one of her sister harpies who had raised several chicks of her own and would certainly be glad to come enlighten me further about the process and about harpy society, since I was so very curious, and that she would go fetch her for me. Saying she would return soon, she launched herself off the edge of nest and flew into the distance.

Left alone with the young woman, I inquired if there was anything I could do to ease her situation. I received a hair-curling string of expletives as a response, accompanied with the petulant kicking of her bare feet in my direction. I noticed then that her toenails were already uncommonly long and sharp. Content to let nature take its course, I decided to leave the chick to her own devices and take my leave before the harpy returned with her friend. I do not wish to impugn the intentions of my hostess, who had thus far been only gracious, but I also know that it is difficult to resist one's nature, and that discretion is the watchword when dealing both with magical contagions and overeager mothers-to-be. I plucked several loose feathers from the nest as keepsakes before descending as far as I could with a length of slender but sturdy rope I had brought in my satchel for just such an occasion. It only brought me partway down the massive tree, so I had to cautiously descend the rest of the way through branches encrusted with powdery white old droppings.

With my feet back on solid ground, I put some distance between myself and the harpy's tree and

finally wedged myself beneath a shallow outcropping at the base of the cliff, burying myself beneath pine needles so that not a speck of me could be seen. I waited until well after nightfall before setting out, in case the harpy should be circling overhead in search of her missing house guest. I found my way to the nearest inn for the most thorough bath of my life, and where I am now recording my encounter. I shall next make with all haste to an apothecary in search of duck fat and rosewater. I pride myself on not being overly superstitious, but I would like to use an ounce of precaution in this case should my theory of transmission prove incorrect. In the near future I will be examining myself for the sudden appearance of feathers, and would also like to ask my editor to be alert for an unusual excess of foul language in my next few missives.

And so, until my next dispatch, I remain,

Intrepidly demystifying the mystical, repeatedly dipping my fingers into the mysteries of the arcane,

Evangeline Peppertree