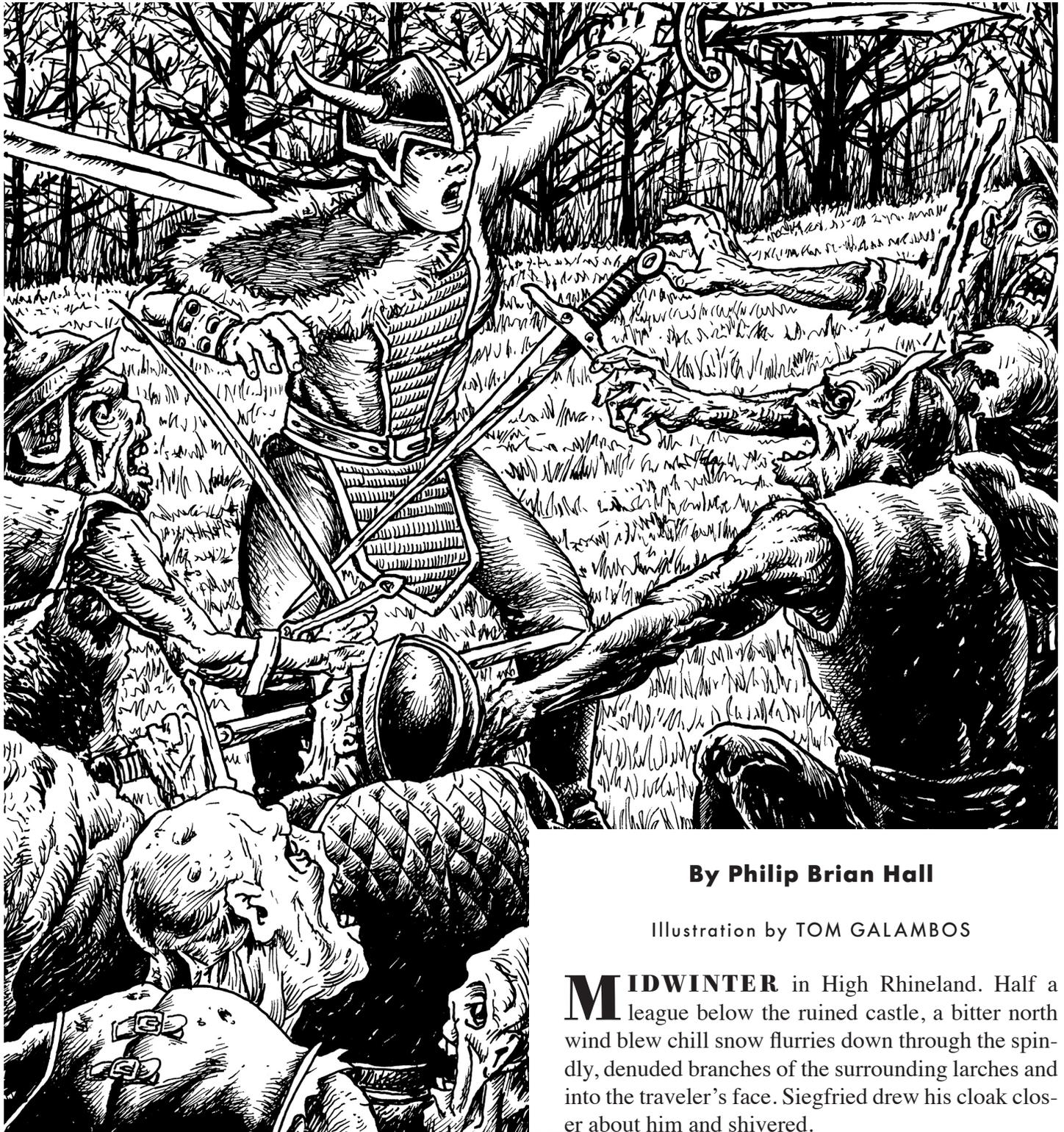


THE RAVEN — F





FEDER'S TOWER



By Philip Brian Hall

Illustration by TOM GALAMBOS

MIDWINTER in High Rhineland. Half a league below the ruined castle, a bitter north wind blew chill snow flurries down through the spindly, denuded branches of the surrounding larches and into the traveler's face. Siegfried drew his cloak closer about him and shivered.

Dreary half-light barely illumined his path through the forest. Ethereal, cloud-cast shadows drifted like specters across the frozen ground, but a thick carpet of dead needles hushed the sound of his steadily climbing footsteps. The old trees' gnarled bark recalled the wrinkled face of the aged villager who'd foretold disaster for his quest.

"Jarl Harald's Tower was cursed from the day it was built," the old man said, staring at Siegfried out of rheumy, near-colorless eyes. "Rather than take the trouble to throw up a new motte for himself, The Raven-Feeder built his fortress atop a burial mound of the Ancient Ones. For his desecration of their resting place they've haunted him and his heirs ever since."

"I don't believe in ghosts," Siegfried laughed dismissively.

"Draugar are not ghosts and your skepticism won't protect you," the old man snorted. "I've seen other young men like you come here in search of Jarl Harald's treasure. I warned them too but, of course, they wouldn't listen. Ah, the temerity of youth! Five of them I've watched climb up — strong, confident, proud Knights Bachelor all of them. But I never yet saw one come back down."

"You were probably asleep," mocked Siegfried, "or maybe drunk. You Rhinelanders are uncommonly fond of your ale, so I've heard."

"Have it your way," the old man said sadly. "But keep your hand close to your sword hilt. And if you hear the roaring of the wyrm, hold your ground and wait. The beast only walks when it senses danger to the castle. Don't go on until it retires to its lair to sleep again. It's bad enough you should defy the Ancient Ones; no mortal man can defy the wyrm as well and hope to return alive."

"Go back to your inglenook by the fire and blow the froth off your beer, old man," Siegfried instructed the venerable sage. "You'll have better success there than you will frightening me. There are no draugar up on that hill and there's no wyrm. But Jarl Harald's treasure *is* up there and I *will* find it."

"You don't need to say why." The old man shook his head. "A second son lacking the patrimony to marry his beloved?"

"How did you know that?" the young knight gasped.

"It's the same old story. Tell me her name; I'll send her word of your untimely death."

"A pox on you! You won't scare me with your foolish superstitions!" Siegfried swung away angrily. Leaving the old man looking pityingly after him, he set off up the hill towards the castle.

The gusting wind flung yet another handful of stinging, icy particles into Siegfried's face, uncomfortably reminding him of old folk-myths about draugar who controlled the weather. Again he shivered.

All stuff and nonsense, of course. The dead were dead. No power on Earth could summon back a departed spirit into its rotting corpse, much less endow the reanimated with superhuman strength and magical powers.

And the Ancient Ones? Pshaw! They'd been long gone even before the invading Romans first trespassed into the Rhineland a millennium ago. The archaic magic buried with their antique bones would not prevent him from procuring Gudrun's bride-price. He would dare anything for love.

Yet, beneath the shining breastplate of a Christian knight-at-arms there beat a heart descended from countless generations of superstitious pagans. Alone in a perilous place, Siegfried's fertile young brain easily conjured up some long-forgotten an-

cestor's terror of demonic forces beyond man's understanding. His hand dropped nervously to the reassuringly solid hilt of his broadsword.

By his own reckoning, he'd left the village in the valley little more than half an hour ago, allowing plenty of time to reach the castle and return before evening. Yet though the day could scarce be past noon, its light already failed. The heavily overcast sky, glimpsed through an interwoven latticework of branches above his head, lowered leaden gray and chilling. Ice-cold fingers of rime already crept stealthily across the brown, decaying bones of last year's bracken that underlay the trees on either side of the way.

Siegfried could not face ridicule. Returning to the village without even having climbed to the castle, let alone searched it, was unthinkable. Should he find himself benighted in this isolated spot, so be it. In such case, would it be best to set about finding himself a hollow tree or some alternative place of shelter whilst light remained, or should he press on and aim to bivouac within the walls of the castle itself?

Before he could arrive at a definite conclusion to his inner debate, Siegfried was stopped in his tracks. An eerie, green glow lit the woodland ahead. The darker the sky grew, the more visible the unnatural light became. Its low, emerald rays silhouetted the boles of the larches and dimly touched their arching branches above as if a scant half-dozen candles should faintly illuminate the man-made columns and high vaulting of some great cathedral.

A sibilant hiss escaped Siegfried's lips as he drew his sword and crept forward. Skull Cleaver he'd melodramatically named the pristine blade, though it had yet to taste blood for the first time.

Some said that just as draugar could rise from the grave, so it was possible to dispatch them back there. They were not invulnerable, merely mortal for a second time if only human hands could strike them a killing blow.

But of course, everything that anyone said about draugar was nonsense because draugar did not exist.

All the same, best approach silently and let Skull Cleaver lead the way. The young knight crept forward on tiptoe, every sense alert for danger.

When he came upon the source of the light, Siegfried cursed himself for a credulous fool. Foxfire. The innocent fungal growth covered every inch of a fallen forest giant's rotting husk, its attractive luminescence designed to lure spore-spreading flies, not terrify the life out of valiant knights. Nicking his thumb to assuage the thirsty blade's slighted honor, the embarrassed young warrior returned Skull Cleaver to his scabbard and climbed on.

As he rounded a bend in the track a dimly-perceived figure seemed to bar his way. Siegfried stopped short once more. Peering into the gloom, he made out a stocky knight, wearing a breastplate and a helmet whose crested black plumes fluttered in the gusting breeze. The man moved not a muscle and uttered not a sound.

Siegfried considered. The knight's sword was drawn but its point was embedded in the earth rather than extending aggressively toward the newcomer. Chivalry forbade surprise attack; he must first give and receive a defiance. Leaving his own sword sheathed, he called out to the silent sentinel.

"Good day to you, sir knight. I am an honest traveler and mean you no harm. May I pass freely?"

"Cronk!" came the reply.

"Forgive me, sir, I don't understand what you say," Siegfried called again. "I've no blade in my hand. May I step forward so we can talk more easily?" Slowly he advanced along the narrow way, holding his hands well clear of his sides to prove his innocent intent.

"Cronk!" The cry came again. A great black raven flapped noisily up and away from its perch on the knight's helmet, whence it soon vanished among the trees. In the dusk and at a distance Siegfried had taken the living bird for its own dead plumage.

He recoiled in alarm, but, seeing no further movement from the knight, Siegfried at length came on until he stood just a few paces away.

The skeleton was held upright by a tall stake driven deep into the ground, to which support its spine was fixed by leather bonds. The breastplate covered bare white ribs and the helmet's visor protected merely the empty eye-sockets of a morbidly-grinning skull. The dead man's bony fingers clutched the hilt of an old sword, its edge already eaten away by rust.

Siegfried exhaled a long, quivering breath. "So," he said to the knight's remains, "you, I assume, are one of the five the old man saw climb up here and never return."

Making the sign of the cross, Siegfried stepped around the obstacle and continued his climb.

Around the next bend, he came upon a similar roadblock, and around the following one another. The fourth body staked along the way was not yet entirely decomposed and two further ravens squabbled fretfully over its rank remaining pickings.

The fifth knight-at-arms could have been little more than two weeks dead. Bloody wounds streaked his eyeless countenance. Much of his surcoat and padded vest remained intact beneath armor which still showed bright traces of a squire's recent assiduous attention. A whole squadron of the scavenger birds hopped and squawked and struggled round about the pungent corpse.

Somehow the newly-dead was more frightful than the long-deceased. Siegfried's gorge rose. "You, I think, are the most recent of the five who climbed before me," he gulped. "I wish you could tell me what enemy you faced. But since you all seem to have died sword in hand, I congratulate you on your honorable deaths. Should my own quest fail, I hope to be as fortunate."

He now recognized his gross error and discourtesy in scoffing at the old man's warning. Vowing, should he live, his first road would be to the sage's door to apologize and humbly beg forgiveness for his offense, Siegfried climbed on.

It was only natural the old man should credit supernatural forces with such killings as Siegfried had just witnessed. For himself, he was more inclined to suspect the hand of man. True, it would take a sizable band of brigands to overcome an armored knight. Perhaps they were not criminals at all but broken men in service to a robber baron, such as those who'd once hampered the growth of commerce by charging illegal tolls on ships passing up and down the Rhine.

Either way, the corpses of his predecessors had clearly been deliberately set up on the path. Why? To deter those tempted to trespass further? But why would men who controlled a castle erect such a warning? Did they fear being attacked again?

Was it possible the successive assaults of the five knights had gravely weakened the outlaw force, obliging defenders who no longer had confidence in their swords to resort to terror tactics? In such case he, Siegfried, might fall heir to the fruits of his noble forerunners' martial endeavors. Should he succeed

in wresting Jarl Harald's treasure from the gang's clutches, he must seek out each knight's dependents and ensure their needs were met.

This time when the path ahead began to glow with strange green light, Siegfried remembered his discomfiting encounter with the foxfire and did not draw his sword as he pressed on. It was just as well.

For a second time, his naive assumptions were mistaken. Three warriors stood shoulder to shoulder, blocking the path ahead, their decaying flesh shining with eerie phosphorescent light; this it was that cast such dreadful effulgence on the forest floor.

Each wore a tunic of wolf's skin that left uncovered the shoulder of his sword arm. A bear's head protected the other shoulder and the remainder of the bear's skin served the warrior as a cloak. They carried round, bronze-rimmed, wooden targes and short bronze swords; their sandals were cross-laced up the length of what had once been fine muscular calves, now blotched by suppurating sores.

Even at such a distance, the stench of death reached Siegfried's nostrils. He could no longer deny the existence of draugar, for if these warriors were not of the undead, then their attire and arms proclaimed them a thousand years old and more. Yet somehow, frightful demons in the flesh, or such as there was left of it, were less terrifying than those in his mind had been.

"How now, gentlemen?" Siegfried's voice betrayed no evidence of uncertainty to his adversaries, though the churning in his stomach would have done so, could they but have heard it. Fear sharpened his already quick wits and supplied him with a possible means of safe passage.

"My name is Siegfried of Saxony and I am come to rid this place of the defilement left behind by its former occupant, Jarl Harald. I have no quarrel with you, Ancient Ones. Allow me to enter and I shall carry away the obscenity and leave you once again in the peace you desire."

"You lie!" the leading draugar's barely intelligible voice grated in response.

"I promise you on my honor. Allow me to pass and I shall do as I say."

"You bring only more defilement!" the draugar retorted. "Prepare to join the corpses of those who came this way before you, who now feed the ravens Jarl Harald loved so well."

Siegfried had heard it said a draugar's brain was as disordered as his body. "Forgive me, sir," he persisted, greatly daring, "but I believe you've made a mistake."

The three draugar snarled derisively.

"If Jarl Harald brought defilement and Jarl Harald also loved feeding corpses to the ravens," Siegfried continued, "it seems to me that he who feeds the ravens must be the defiler."

The warriors pointed their swords and paced forward.

"Now, if you kill me," Siegfried concluded hastily, "then *you* feed the ravens just as Harald did, whereas, if you let me through, the ravens go unfed and there is no further defilement. Do I not speak the truth?"

The three draugar were nonplussed. They halted and looked one to another for a decision. Drawing aside his colleagues into conclave, the leader engaged them in whispered discussion that soon resolved itself into a rowdy argument conducted in the ancient tongue, the horrid undead voices rasping like rusty saws in seasoned heartwood.