

The Banner

by Patrick Sullivan

A wand'rer once beside me rode
With banner borne on high,
Yet naught but dust upon that road
Would rally to her cry.
Her banner pale – a banner dead,
Its masters gone away –
Did lonely fly there overhead
Against a sky of grey.

I asked the wand'rer why she bore
So long past that last sigh
Such colors now long-lost to lore,
Their lords' lifeblood run dry.
Said she, "I ride for Elderwood,
Where stories meet their end.
This banner long and proudly stood,
But now it flies condemned.

"The colors once that hung above
A hearth and home and kin
Now herald naught that men speak of,
Mem'ry lost, thread worn thin."
With solemn grip and sorrowed brow
She led them on parade:
The empty road, the fallen bough,
And ghosts behind her strayed.

A sadness and a mournful fear
Arose within my chest,
For none would sing of – none would cheer –
That banner riding west.
My mouth I opened, then, to speak:
"This story none will hear—
Tell it to me, that it might live,
For Elderwood is near."

The wanderer, she looked ahead
Down narrow, forlorn trail,
Her charge's tattered once-gold thread
Askance upon the gale.
Said she, "The song is one of years
And fam'ly forged within
A toil of blood, and sweat, and tears –
The seeds of hearth and kin."

Said I, "but these things surely last;
A blood-bond never wanes!"
But like great Ozymandias,
Nothing beside remains.
The banner once that cherished flew
O'er kings and men as one—
Who now pays that pale flag its due,
Torn-twain 'neath setting sun?

The wand'rer spoke. "I'll tell you, friend,
Of shelter in a storm,
A splendid hall where bards attend
And bread is ever warm.
A place for stories fondly sung
Where kin sit 'round a fire;
In such a place this banner hung—
The hall of Havenshire."

We rode, and there around us rose
That hall's ghost board for board:
A haven-home where each man knows
To leave behind the sword.
The meek, the lost, and downtrodden
Drank with the proud and strong—
Not a single cup forgotten,
Nor empty for too long.

At oaken, lordly table stood
The father of it all:
A smile enshrouded by a hood,
Arms open as his hall.
"Havenslord," the name unspoken –
As time-lost as his face –
Stirred from mem'ries of songs broken,
So long ago erased.

His voice, it boomed, "You're welcome here,
If worthy you have aught
To visit on a hungry ear—
What stories have you brought?"
For there above that hall-lord hung
A saga told in thread:
A banner, stitched with tales once-sung,
Once-cherished, now long-dead.

A people's wealth, weighed not in gold,
But words, and thoughts, and names,
Lay there in hoard – an epic told
O'er hearthfire's home-wrought flames.

Such wealth was never meant to last.

Upon my eyes, the spell did break
And hall-song fade away,
As though from dreams I'd come awake
To skies of somber grey.
I felt the tears upon my cheek
As real as was that hall,
And then resolved that I would seek
That lord who welcomes all.

But spake the pilgrim, "Ashen cold
Now lies the haven's hearth,
And tarnished – tattered – hangs the gold
That bore its life and worth."

A valiant last defender, then,
Seemed that banner brave—
A lonely mem'ry left by men
To mark their stories' grave.

I followed, silent, close behind
That standard-bearer grim
Whose jaw was set, to fate resigned,
Her words a ghostly hymn:
"Look now ahead, though far afield
Lie both song and singer,
While Havenshire's fate is sealed,
Echoes yet may linger."

I looked up from the road, and then
Beheld a wondrous thing:
The endless, mournful grey broken
By colors rippling.
We'd come upon great Elderwood,
A forest not of trees—
Where banners all in columns stood
Aflutter in the breeze.

And there, among the rank and file,
A final space unmanned—
A resting place, a wand'rer's mile
From hearth and hall-song grand.
My road-companion looked to me,
Then held at length the stave—
And so the wanderer to me
The tired banner gave.

Said she, "This story's end is now,
And with you it may die."
She gave a solemn mourner's bow,
And westward cast her eye
To elder banners, each resigned
To ne'er see one more dawn,
And when I thought to glance behind
The wanderer was gone.

But:

"To what foul end," my voice I heard,
"Must haven's hall-song come?"
While I knew not each threaded word,
The banner still held some.
To harsh winds bare the fabric soft,
Of that there'd come no good—
And so, with banner borne aloft,
I turned from Elderwood.

Though Havenshire may be dead
(For better or for worse),
Upon that saga told in thread
I've stitched an extra verse:

"As long as wind may carry breath,
So long the banners fly—
While words may pass 'twixt life and death
The stories never die."