

## Visitors in the Night

by Mark Motley

*(All this took place years ago. Some of it ... is true.)*

Clint and I had each attempted to climb Mt. Rainier twice before. He'd summited both times. I'd only made the top once, with the professional guides.

Rainier is usually a two-day climb with a night either at Camp Muir, or higher at the Ingraham Flats. Teams start for the summit rim between 3 and 5 AM on day two to summit in time to get off the upper mountain before afternoon sun softens the snow.

Blinding white snow<sup>1</sup> and deep cobalt skies colored the first day of our third climb and we reached the Ingraham Flats in good time. Clint, who was better with the stove, melted snow for drinking water while I found cell coverage to check the weather. The new forecast was a rude revelation: a sudden storm approached from the coast – the other side of the mountain. Precipitation was predicted by mid-morning next day. At that altitude, we knew that meant snow, even in July. We debated options and decided to start at midnight, four hours early, try to summit by sunup, get back to high camp by 8 AM, ahead of the weather, and then, weather permitting, descend to Camp Muir and maybe to the trailhead at Paradise, Washington. If it looked bad at midnight, we'd head down then. It seemed like a good idea ... at the time.

We tried to sleep at 4 PM, July sun high. By 8 PM, gusts of wind began to pound the tent, sounding exactly as if someone whacked it hard with a broom, making sleep elusive, even with the earplugs. We figured we'd head down at Midnight, but when we got up at 11, it wasn't so bad. We checked for a weather update. No service. We decided to go for it.

Disappointment Cleaver is a well-named blade of rock piercing the Southeast shoulder of the mountain, splitting two glaciers, and angling upward about a thousand feet, sometimes in parallel ridges with lots of exposed rock and short bluffs. In its lower half, the trail is mostly switchbacks on the right side of the ridge, heading up. Mid-way, the trail shifts left and leaves the ridge, traversing a steep slope. From the top of the Cleaver, it's another 2,000 feet to the summit.

Ascending the lower Cleaver, we *were sheltered from the wind which came from our left* - so it seemed better for a time. Clint led our 2-man rope team and where the trail left the ridge, he recoiled *buffeted by the wind when he cleared the break*. About a hundred yards into that

pitch on the upper Cleaver, we heard a gust coming that knocked us both off our feet backward into the snow rut of the trail (which was good: the drop to the left was steep). We knew then our summit attempt was over. Clint looked back at me. I nodded. *Without a word, we turned in place and rushed to get behind the windbreak at the ridge before the next big gust of wind arrived. Snow started and quickly became a whiteout in headlamp beams.*

Descending is trickier than climbing, and descending Disappointment Cleaver in blinding snow, wind, and pitch dark would have been too difficult – especially the spot at its base called the Bowling Alley where *the trail had hugged the edge of a gaping crevasse. We knew we'd have to hunker down ... and ride it out there.*

*We sat there side by side, our backs to the wall ... with Clint to my left. To his left was enough ice for an ice screw - a solid anchor for our rope. I clipped in just below him. To my right there was no ice. I wedged the spike of my ice axe into a crack in the rock and clipped the rope to that for a lesser anchor there. We rigged web slings over boulders for two more anchors - precautions against blowing off the mountain.*

I vaguely recalled a scripture – *about Paul on a ship at sea in a storm at night; from Acts 27:*

*"...neither sun nor stars ... appeared, and no small tempest lay on us ... Then fearing lest we should have fallen upon rocks, they cast four anchors out of the stern and wished for the day."*

Secured by four anchors ourselves, *I knew we too would long for the dawn.*

I had something called a “space blanket”, a polymer coated foil, supposed to reflect heat. Light and folded small as a bar of soap, I'd carried it for years in case of emergency. Deciding this was it, I wrapped it around me, thinking it might cut the wind. But the wind just cut it – ripped it to shreds in a hurry. Clint watched that episode without comment, but *I think with some dismay at my poor form.*

It wasn't the cold, though was bitterly cold. It wasn't the snow, though it snowed all night. It was the wind - gusts we could hear coming, wave after wave, *each one seemed more powerful than the last. I thought, the next big one or the one after that would surely blow us both right off the mountain.*

Shivering, I pulled my hood tighter. Time crawled. Concentrating with all my might, I tried to escape in my mind to someplace warmer, happier. I imagined a beach: sweltering sun, a soft breeze, the smell of salt air, the sensation of sand under bare feet, the sounds of surging surf, stirring palms, and squawking seagulls. I hoped to go there in my mind. When it didn't work, I tried harder.

After some time of that, I became unaware of the mountain and the wind and the cold. I was someplace else unknown. I don't know the setting, but it wasn't cold, and it wasn't windy. And then she appeared, my great grandmother, Pearl Walker Reynolds, Momma Reynolds to all the grandchildren. She had passed when I was 19, having known great loss in her life: born in 1891, both her parents died when she was 4 years old. She lived to be 85, survived her husband by 22 years. She buried two children. Cataract surgery in the 1950s required glasses with the "coke-bottle" lenses. She was also a character: she stopped counting her age at 72. Every birthday, I'd ask, "Momma Reynolds, how old are you this year?" She always played along: "Honey, this year I'm 72-umhm". And there she was in that other place, just standing there, beaming. She spoke only one word: "honey". I felt her love wrap me like a warm blanket. *And then I was yanked back to the tempest on the mountain by another great blast of the wind.* It ripped away the last piece of space blanket, swept into darkness. The gust passed. The other place beckoned.

I returned, more easily this time, but Momma Reynolds was gone, replaced by a strikingly beautiful woman, with wavy red hair wearing soldier's garb: a worn leather tunic covered with metal rings about an inch across sewn to the leather in a tight pattern - early chain-mail. She said nothing but I knew she was Gwenllian ferch Gruffudd, my Welch 29<sup>th</sup> great grandmother<sup>2</sup> - Momma Reynold's 26<sup>th</sup>. In 1136, her husband, king of South Wales, was away seeking allies against the Normans when the Norman invasion arrived at her doorstep. In his absence, she mustered and led an army against them. Thought by some<sup>4</sup> the most likely author of *The Four Branches of The Mabinogi*, earliest prose stories of Britain, Gwenllian was also an experienced warrior, and well known as the best archer in Wales. She and her husband had led mounted raids against the Normans for years, including while she was heavily pregnant. But in this battle, outnumbered, betrayed, and surrounded, her shield arm broken by a brute of a Norman knight<sup>5</sup>, and nearly alone, she yielded. The Bishop of London, who commanded that Norman army, defied convention of ransoming captured nobles, and ordered Gwenllian and her son Maelgwyn<sup>6</sup> beheaded on the battlefield, a field now called "the field of Gwenllian". Her death inspired a larger uprising and "Revenge for Gwenllian!" became the Welch battle cry for generations.

Visiting me, she was silent, but was ... not thrilled about a descendant descending into self-pity. I didn't want that, I wanted comfort and empathy, but after some time, I began to see merit in her unspoken message, to feel less the victim, and focus more on carrying on. *And with that she was gone, having said not a word.*

I wondered what other dead relative would come next. Then appeared no relative at all but rather, my friend Peter Schramm, who had only passed a few months earlier. "Mark", he said, "you've gotten yourself into a bit of a jam." Born in communist Hungary, his family escaped via Austria and came to America when he was ten, his father explaining they were

Americans, born in the wrong place. I was surprised but thrilled to see Peter. He chuckled softly and said, "I just came to introduce you to my friend, Abraham."

With that, Peter disappeared, replaced by Abraham Lincoln! I gasped. Lincoln looked relaxed, not haggard as in those later photographs. He spoke, "Peter thinks I might help you pass the time", sounding just like Daniel Day Lewis in that wonderful movie. Of course – in life Peter had been such a friend of Lincoln's words, I shouldn't have been surprised they'd become friends there, wherever there was. Peter and I discussed the Gettysburg Address the first time we met, first of many wonderful conversations.

Those memories raced by. I had a question for Lincoln going back to conversations with Peter, but no, he wasn't there for questions. He was there to recite some written words. He offered a suggestion: "Peter thought you might enjoy my Second Inaugural. Would that be agreeable?" Of course, I nodded.

*Those good words flowed like music with the soul of a sermon.* No mere political speech, those were words of a great spiritual leader, much more prophet than president: "... let us judge not ... The Almighty has His own purposes ... in the providence of God ... if God wills that it continue ... and, the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether". That inaugural, that sermon... lifted me. Then, nearing the wonderful apex, "With malice toward none, with cha- ..." a great gust pushed Clint into me, pulling me back to the side of the mountain, to the here and now. It was a strong blast. The storm raged *as we were in the belly of the beast.*

Moving between the mountain and the other place got easier each time. When that gust passed, the next visitor I recall was Johnny Cash. I spoke,

"Mr. Cash".

"Call me Johnny."

"I'd love to just have like a dinner conversation, you know."

"Son, we know what ya' want – we're bringin' what ya' need."

Would he walk the line, or still miss someone, maybe with a Tennessee flattop box? No! He sang "Hurt", his cover of a 9-Inch Nails song about drug addiction, ruined life, and broken relationships. It was on his last CD. Its music video was recorded when he was 71 – seven months before he died. June was in the video with him. She died three months later. So very sad, ... this master artist and drug addict singing so personally about wrecked life near the end of his. The song won lots of awards. The British NME (New Music Express) gave it a unique award: "Greatest Music Video of All Time"<sup>7</sup>. Another critic called it "still the saddest music video of all time"<sup>8</sup>. May-be. Deep into that long night, that song was powerful, suggesting things could certainly be worse.

Blues men came: Robert Johnson, Blind Willie Johnson, Blind Willie McTell, Blind Lemon Jefferson, /Son House, Lightening Hopkins, Mississippi John Hurt. Then *I recall being suddenly recalled to the mountain by the biggest blow yet with a long, high moan.* It passed. I checked: it was just after 3:30 AM. Snow had begun to taper.

Next came authors, Shakespeare first. You may wonder about his identity - sorry, I didn't ask. But for what it's worth, he looked for all the world like the actor who played Shakespeare in the film of Tom Stoppard's "Shakespeare in Love". I did ask if he could offer tips on writing - he just smiled. He brought Portia's speech on mercy from *The Merchant of Venice*:

*"The quality of mercy is not strained.  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heav'n  
Upon the place beneath"*

Others followed. Melville read from The Try-Works chapter of *Moby Dick*: "... then the rushing *Pequod*, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, (etc.)" Mark Twain solemnly read from "The War Prayer" (*the one he insisted be published after his death*).

Robert Burns brought "*Green Grow the Rashes, O; The sweetest hours that e'er I spend, Are spent among the lasses, O.*" Dorothy Parker brought her wit and quips that made me smile: "What fresh hell is this? It's not just plain terrible, it's fancy terrible with raisins on it. But morning comes, and the first thing I do in the morning is brush my teeth and sharpen my tongue."

The next ghost to visit was my 18<sup>th</sup> great grandfather<sup>9</sup> Henry Percy, Hotspur – the real one, not the character from Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part 1 – I think. *I know he visited me in the storm on the mountain*, not in the warm, quiet, other place. He spoke:

*"In faith, at arms in battle is honor won  
And yet a foolish 'venture finds you here,  
All crouched on the lee side of a stone  
Have put to risk near all that you hold dear.*

*'Tis said that to be rash is in this blood  
A trait of every Percy through these years.  
If 'tis from me, then here's to you a word:  
Such 'venture looks to only end in tears.*

*No honor's gained if fallen on the field  
Tae this can I attest with some renown.  
Tae that deep rest that calls ye do not yield*

*Let blow this wind, then rise and walk ye down.*

*'Sblood! The devil roars this cursèd night,  
Methinks he's howlin' Irish o'er the ridge.  
This tempest will give way an' yield tae light,  
Yet has it served these mystic cords to bridge."*

With that, he too departed. ... I tried to return to the warm, comfortable, other place, but ... couldn't get there. Hotspur's words kept rattling around and had to do.

Relatives, a friend, historical figures, musicians, authors. I've shared what I recall. I only remember some – it was a long night. It was just after 4:45 AM when I last checked. I must have dozed after that.

Clint shook me awake. Confused, my eyes slowly focused, head stiffly turned his way absorbing the meaning of the near-dawn light – we'd survived the night!

*Clint welcomed me to our reprieve with this bright, sunny greeting:*

"You look like shit".

Tapping low energy reserves, I managed a weak smile and a half-chuckle.

"Mornin' to you, too", adding, "we still up on the Cleaver?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Hmm ... water?"

"Frozen."

I nodded understanding.

*And from the east  
the sun arose into a crystalline sky.*

Dawn broke clear, cold, still, and radiant. We hadn't summited, but we'd walk away, a victory we knew the mountain had granted. Or, perhaps a tender mercy from another source.

We descended, stopping briefly at our high camp to melt water, wolf energy bars, and pack. Clint's beautiful yellow expedition tent had ripped some but hadn't blown away. We made Camp Muir by 8 AM. The staff there gave us water and hot oatmeal.

*And in their hut  
we slept until the middle of the day,  
as I dreamed recalling visitors in the night.*

**Notes:**

- 1) Bright sun at altitude in glaciers and snowfields demands glacier glasses, which we used. These have very dark lenses and leather blinders - though Clint's were dark prescription glasses with blinders fashioned of duct-tape: too cool for store-bought.
  
- 2) Genealogy:
  - William Mark Motley, living; b. Lexington, Fayette County, KY
  - Billy Motley, 1928-2004; b. Jessamine Cnty, KY, d. Georgetown, KY
  - Jewell Reynolds, 1912-1985; b. Jessamine Cnty, KY, d. Lexington, Fayette Cnty, KY
  - Pearl Walker Reynolds**, 1891-1976; Ky, b. Jessamine Cnty, KY, d. Pollard, Jessamine Cnty, KY
  - McClellan "Clell" Walker; KY
  - Mary Ann Polly Murphy, 1829-1929; b. Jessamine Cnty, KY, d. Kokomo, IN
  - John Murphy, Jr., 1804-1848; b. & d. Jessamine Cnty, Kentucky
  - Mary Polly Yarbrough, 1782-1866; b. Halifax, Virginia, d. Garrard Cnty, Kentucky
  - Randolph Norman Yarbrough, 1756-1804; b. Goochland, Virginia, d. Floyd Cnty, Kentucky, United States (in KY the 1790 census, so he had moved to KY in its first 15 years of settlement)
  - Mary Spurlock, 1710-1775, b. & d. New Kent; Colonial Virginia
  - Ann Toney, 1690-1759, b. New Kent, Colonial Virginia; d. Goochland, Colonial Virginia
  - Alexander William Kaster Toney, 1668-1735; b. & d. New Kent, Colonial Virginia
  - Ann Elizabeth Bishop, 1638-1675; Jamestown, Virginia, d. in Indian attack, New Kent, Virginia
  - Capt. John Bishop of Swan's Bay, 1590-1656; b. Linlithgowshire, Scotland, d. Virginia, British Colonial America
  - Knight William Bishop the Elder 1570-1634; b. & d. West Lothian, Scotland
  - Sir James Bishop, 1540-1577; b. & d. West Lothian, Scotland
  - Sir Richard Bishop, 1524-1625; Suffolk, England
  - Lady Marjorie Gray, 1500-1585; b. Suffolk, England, d. Northamptonshire, England
  - Countess Elizabeth Stewart; 1465-1529, Scotland
  - John Stewart, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Atholl; 1440-1512, Scotland
  - Joan Beaufort, Queen Consort of Scotland, 1407-1445; b. London, d. Castle Dunbar, Scotland (wife of James 1, King of Scotland, Black Knight of Lorn)
  - Margaret Holland, Dutchess of Clarence, 1385-1439; b. Buchinghamshire, England, d. London
  - Alice FitzAlan, 1352-1415; b. Arundel Castle, Sussex, England, d. Oxfordshire, England
  - Elanor of Lancaster, Countess of Arundel, 1318-1372; b. Wales, d. Sussex, England
  - Maud of Lancaster, Chaworth de Chaworth 1282-1322; b. Wales, d. Hampshire, England
  - Patrick de Chaworth, Knight, 1254-1283; b. Gloucestershire, England, d. Wales
  - Hawise de Londres, 1223-1274; b. Northamptonshire, England, d. Wales
  - Thomas de Londres, Lord Kidwillyn, 1198-1216; b. Northamptonshire, England, d. Wales
  - Maurice de Londres, 1165- ?; Wales
  - Margaret Ferch Caradog, 1148-1230; b. Wales, d. York Castle, England
  - Gwladys ferch Gruffydd, abt. 1105-1175; Wales
  - Gwenllian ferch Gruffydd**, abt. 1088-1136; b. Isle of Ynys Mon, Wales, d. near Kidwelly Castle, Wales, beheaded
  
- 3) When Gwenllian and her husband, Gruffudd ap Rhys, executed their raids on the Normans, they split the loot with their people. Several posit they were the real-life inspiration for the later stories in English folklore of Robin Hood and Maid Marian, which first appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

- 4) Dr. Andrew Breeze, FSA, FRHistS, professor at the University of Navarre, Pamplona. Educated at Oxford and Cambridge, in his book, *The Origins of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, Breeze makes a detailed case that Gwennllian ferch Gruffydd was the most likely author of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, central four books of *The Mabinogian*. Written in Middle Welsh, this collection of 11 tales is considered the earliest prose literature of Britain. Oldest records containing these tales are the *Red Book of Hergest* and the *Whyte Book of Rhydderch*. Hergest is a ridge on the border between Wales and England, England's West March. J.R.R. Tolkein's fictional *Red Book of West March* takes its name directly from the *Red Book of Hergest*, and it consists primarily of *The Mabinogian*.

The *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* are thought to predate the other seven, and is steeped in Welsh mythology, magic (including shape-shifting), and romance. A beautiful and powerful maiden named Rhiannon is central to two of these stories. She is also a skilled rider with a powerful, magic horse. Stevie Nicks' haunting song "Rhiannon" was about her.

Five of the books of *The Mabinogian* contain the earliest known references to Arthur, an early Welsh chieftain/warlord. One story, *Culhwych and Olwen*, is set in Arthur's Court and includes a list of his knights. Others are largely focused on quests of his knights and one includes earliest reference to the Grail legend. These tales are believed to predate Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regnum Britanniae*.

- 5) J. R. R. Tolkien was a deep student of the Welsh language and of Welsh literature. He translated one of the books of *The Mabinogian*, unpublished manuscript of which is held at the Bodleian Library at Oxford. In her death, Gwennllian was in part inspiration for Tolkien's character Eowyn, the noble, tragic shieldmaiden who disguised in armor to fight with the men and whose shield arm was broken by a Nazgul.

Gwennllian not only married a king, she was the youngest daughter of the great king, Gruffydd ap Cynan. As an aside, I would also suggest Gwennllian was inspiration for the spunky, red-haired Celtic girl in Disney's movie *Brave* who also happened to be an excellent archer, and the daughter of a great chieftain/king.

- 6) Two of her sons, Morgan and Maelgwyn were with her in the Battle of Maes Gwennllian. Some say it was Morgan, not Maelgwyn beheaded with her. But most indicate Morgan died in the battle, cut down protecting his mother and that the younger Maelgwyn was the one beheaded with her. Burning at the stake was the standard execution for women then, so beheading was considered a respectful exception.

A surviving son, Rhys ap Gruffydd later became a powerful king in South Wales, first to take the name, Prince of Wales. His father's grandfather was Tewdr Mawr, founder of the Tudor line of royalty. All the British Tudor royals trace lineage through Gwennllian: Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI, Jane (9 days), Mary I, and most notable of all, Queen Elizabeth I. Queen Elizabeth II is also a descendant of Gwennllian through Henry VII's sister, Queen Margaret of Scotland (grandmother of Mary, Queen of Scots).

- 7) New Music Express, 2011: <https://www.johnnycash.com/award/nme/>
- 8) Christopher Hooton, 2015. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/the-story-behind-johnny-cash-s-hurt-still-the-saddest-music-video-of-all-time-a6683371.html>

Note: there are some dozens of videos on Youtube featuring individuals reacting to Johnny Cash's "Hurt" as heard for the first time. Some are speechless. Some are overcome. All are deeply moved. Search: "Johnny Cash Hurt reaction".

There are many "Top Covers" lists on the web. Cash's "Hurt" is on most of them, nearly always in the top 5. Several have it #1. Rolling Stone's list in 2011 had it as #2.

- 9) See "To Pluck Bright Honor for the Hard Spur's Moon", Cincinnati Literary Club budget paper, Feb., 2020. <http://cincylit.org/literaryclubsite/pr/Lit%20Club%20Papers/Papers2020/20200224Motley.pdf>

Read for the Cincinnati Literary Club May 24, 2021.