

SWEETBRIAR

by **Brian O'Hanrahan**

Night descended on the small town of Sweetbriar. Black chimney-smoke billowed from thatched roofs, and patrons trudged languidly from their respective places of work towards the local watering hole. "Smilin' Jack's" it was called, judging by the sign hanging out front that swayed indifferently in the faint breeze. How anyone could muster a smile in such a cesspit was beyond me. The streets were narrow, and only got more so the further you went - with three and even four-story shacks threatening to collapse on top of those beneath at any moment. And everywhere you walked, the same smell persisted - that of vile excrement, both human and animal. Unfortunately, the choice was not up to me. I pulled the hood of my cloak tightly around my neck, and started towards the tavern.

A group of fireflies danced past me as I shuffled cautiously along the cobblestone pavement. I heard the clanging metal armour of the city guard as they approached, and I quickened my pace somewhat - though still trying to avoid attention. The thud of their iron boots grew louder, and then became softer again as they passed behind me out of sight. I breathed a quiet sigh of relief as I reached the alehouse door. There were no windows to be found of the front of the establishment, but sound spilled out of the half-open doorway. Sounds of drinking and general drunken amusement - and also music. Someone was playing a mandolin or lute and attempting to sing over the patrons, though it was not working.

As I stepped inside, slowly pushing the wooden door inward, the first thing to hit me was the stench. Somehow, it was even worse than out on the street. The smell was a foul mix of unwashed workers, stale vomit, and spilled booze. The warmth hit me next, however, and I noticed a sizable hearth directly to my left as I pushed my body inside. The building was packed; jammed to the brim with all sorts. Mostly miners, I decided - noticing some of the

blackened faces staring back at me as I entered. They did not appear too hostile though, and returned to their drinks when they realised I was no acquaintance of theirs. On the far right-hand side of the large room, next to the stairs, was the bar. A tall, burly woman stood behind it, carelessly drying some tankards with an all-too-ragged cloth, and wearing a permanent scowl on her face. Evidently, she was not Smilin' Jack.

I made my way towards the bar, searching for openings in the crowd and amongst the many tables. A well-built bearded man in a sleeveless tunic stumbled towards me, reeking of sweat and vodka. I slipped away from him just in time to hear the distinctive sound of someone throwing up behind my back. The barkeep shot a look in my direction and, for a brief moment, I caught her eye. I thought a hint of suspicion flashed on her face, but in an instant she had regained her frown and stern expression.

“Jack!” she yelled suddenly, without turning her head. “That’s another one! Over by the door!”

A small bald man appeared from the dark room behind her.

“Aw, for Chrissake”, he exclaimed - dragging a filthy mop and bucket behind him.

He had a leather patch over one eye, and bore a distinguishing scar on his cheek; going from his lip right up to his ear. He grumbled something about ‘vagrants’ and ‘good-for-nothings’ as he limped past me.

I reached the bar, and again the woman looked towards me. I still had my hood up, and felt inclined to take it down; though I knew that was far too risky. I couldn’t risk even one of the ‘vagrants’ recognising me.

“Getcha anything?” the lady inquired, in an annoyed tone.

“I believe a parcel was left here for me yesterday”, I replied calmly. “With a letter ‘A’ on the front”.

She narrowed her eyes, as if studying me intently.

“So, you’re mister ‘A’ then, huh?”

Before I could say anything, she continued.

“Well, mister ‘A’, you can have your package. But, in case you haven’t noticed, this is a tavern - not some kind of courier service. You gotta buy somethin’ first”.

I paused for a moment before nodding.

“Very well”, I said. “Soup”.

She briskly handed me the leather-bound satchel, and turned around to disappear into the room behind her.

As I began to unravel the package, I noticed a familiar pair of drunken eyes staring at me from the next barstool. I looked over to see a rugged miner with a red beard and a ponytail - his gaze fixated on my newly-acquired item. Though dressed in the same clothes as everyone else, his were undoubtedly much better maintained. His face too was much cleaner, without a spot of soot on it - though he was just as inebriated as the others.

“What’s in the bag?” he slurred, clearly struggling to stay upright in his seat.

“Who’s asking?” I retorted.

He glowered at me. “The boss of the bloody mine, that’s who!” he almost shouted. “And that makes me boss of the town! Are you sayin’ you don’t know who I am!?”

“I’m afraid not”, I lied, pulling a dark brown bottle from the bag. “I’m new in town”.

He noticed the label of ‘rum’ almost immediately, and snatched it from my hand in an instant.

“Well, the first thing you should know”, he said as he pawed the cork from the vessel, “is that all newcomers have to pay the tax.”

He grinned as he took a swig from the bottle; finishing almost half of it in a single gulp.

I watched him silently as he quickly finished the rest of the drink.

“Whaddya think you’re think gonna do, huh?”, he snarled; gripping the bottle tighter.

“Actually”, I responded, “I was just leaving”.

He kept his eyes locked on me as I pulled a single gold coin from the satchel and placed it on the bar. I turned smoothly and sauntered towards the exit.

As I neared the fireplace, I heard an intense fit of coughing erupt from the other side of the room. As I approached the door, it grew more violent and spluttering. As I pulled the door inwards it became weaker and more rasping. And as I stepped out into the street, I could just make out the sounds of a stool toppling and a bottle smashing off the floor.

Pulling my hood tightly around my neck, I reached once again into the satchel. I pulled out a hefty pouch of gold, along with a sketch of a red-bearded man with a ponytail. The coins jingled with each step I took.