



## ULLY THE PIPER

---

ANDRE NORTON

THE DALES OF HIGH HALLECK are many and some are even forgotten, save by those who live in them. During the great war with the invaders from overseas, when the lords of the dales and their armsmen fought, skulked, prospered, or sank in defeat, there were small places left to a kind of slumber, overlooked by warriors. There, life went on as it always had, the dalesmen content in their islands of safety, letting the rest of the world roar on as it would.

In such a dale lay Coomb Brackett, a straggle of houses and farms with no right to the title of village, though so the indwellers called it. So tall were the ridges guarding it that few but the wild shepherds of the crags knew what lay beyond them, and many of their tales were discounted by the dalesmen. But there were also ill legends about those heights that had come down from the elder days when humankind first pushed this far north and west. For men were not the first to settle here, though story said that their predecessors had worn the outward seeming of men for convenience, their real aspect being such that no

dalesman would care to look upon them by morn light.

While those elder ones had withdrawn, seeking a refuge in the Beyond Wilderness, yet at times they returned on strange pilgrimages. Did not the dalesmen keep certain feast days—or nights—when they took offerings up to rocks which bore queer markings that had not been chiseled there by wind and weather? The reason for those offerings no man now living could tell, but that luck followed their giving was an established fact.

But the dale was good enough for the men of Coomb Brackett. Its fields were rich, a shallow river winding through them. Orchards of fruit flourished and small woodland copses held nut trees which also bore crops in season. Fat sheep fed placidly in the uplands, cattle ambled to the river to drink and went then to graze once more. Men sowed in spring, harvested in early autumn, and lay snug in their homesteads in winter. As they often said to one another, who wanted more in this life?

They were as plump as their cattle and almost as slow moving at times. There was little to plague them, for even the Lord of Fartherdale, to whom they owed loyalty, had not sent his tithemen for a tale of years. There was a rumor that the lord was dead in the far-off war. Some of the prudent put aside a folding of woolen or a bolting of linen, well sprinkled with herbs to keep it fresh, against the day when the tithes might be asked again. But for the most part they spun their flax and wool, wove it into stout cloth for their own backs, ate their beef and mutton, drank ale brewed from their barley and wine from their fruit, and thought that trouble was something which struck at others far beyond their protecting heights.

There was only one among them who was not satisfied with things as they comfortably were, because for him there was no comfort. Ully of the hands was not the smallest, nor the youngest of the lads of Coomb Brackett—he was the different one. Longing to be as the rest filled him sometimes with a pain he could hardly bear.

He sat on his small cart and watched the rest off to the feasting on May Day and Harvest Home; and he watched them dance Rings Around following the smoking great roast at Yule—his clever hands folded in upon themselves until the nails bit sorely into the flesh of his palms.

There had been a tree to climb when he was so young he could not rightly recollect what life had been like before that hour. After he fell he had learned what it meant to go hunched of back and useless of leg, able to get from one place to another only by huddling on his cart and pushing it along the ground with two sticks.

He was mender-in-chief for the dale, though he could never mend himself. Aught that was broken was brought to him so that his widowed mother could sort out the pieces, and then Ully worked patiently hour by hour to make it whole again. Sometimes he thought that more than his body had been broken in that fall, and that slowly pieces of his spirit were flaking away within him. For Ully, being chained to his cart, was active in his mind and had many strange ideas he never shared with the world.

Only on a night such as this, when it was midsummer and the youth of the village were streaming up into the hills to set out first fruit, new bread, a flagon of milk, and another of wine on the offering rock. . . . He did not want to sit and think his life away! He was young in spirit, torn by such longings as sometimes made him want to howl and beat with his fists upon the ground, or pound the body which imprisoned him. But for the sake of his mother he never gave way so, for she would believe him mad, and he was not that—yet.

He listened to the singing as the company climbed, giving the rallying call to the all-night dancing:

“High Dilly, High Dally,  
Come Lilly, Come Lally!  
Dance for the Ribbons—  
Dance for new Shoes!”

Who would dance so well this night that he would return by morn's light wearing the new shoes, she the snood of bright ribbons?

Not Stephen of the mill; he was as heavy-footed in such frolicking as if he carried one of the filled flour sacks across his ox-strong shoulders. Not Gretta of the inn, who so wanted to be graceful. (Ully had seen her in the goose meadow by the river practicing steps in secret. She was a kind maid and he wished her as well as he did any of those he thought of as the straight people.)

No, this year, as always, it would be Matt of High Ridge Garth, and Morgana, the smith's daughter. Ully frowned at the hedge which hid the upper road from him, crouched low as he was.

Morgana he knew little of, save that she saw only what she wished to see and did only what it pleased her to do. But Matt he disliked, for Matt was rough of hand and tongue, caring little what he left broken or torn behind his heavily tramped way—whether it was something which could be mended, or the feelings of others, which could not. Ully had had to deal with both kinds of Matt's destruction, and some he had never been able to put right.

They were still singing.

Ully set his teeth hard upon his lower lip. He might be small and crooked of body, but he was a man; and a man did not wail over his hurts. It was so fine a night he could not bear as yet to go back to the cottage. The scent of his mother's garden arose about him, seeming even stronger in the twilight. He reached within his shirt and brought out his greatest triumph of mending, twisted it in his clever fingers, and then raised it to his lips.

The winter before, one of the rare strangers who ever came over the almost obliterated ridge road had stopped at the inn. He had brought news of battles and lords they had never heard of. Most of Coomb Brackett, even men from the high garths, had come to listen, though to them it was more tale than reality.

At last the stranger had pulled out his pipe of polished wood and had blown sweet notes on it. Then he had laid it aside as Morgana came to share his bench; she took it as her just due that the first smiles of any man were for her. Matt, jealous of the outsider, had slammed down his tankard so hard that he had jarred the pipe on the floor and broken it.

There had been hot words then, and Matt had sullenly paid the stranger a silver piece. But Gretta had picked up the pieces and brought them to Ully, saying wistfully that the music the stranger had made on it was so sweet she longed to hear its like again.

Ully had worked hard to put it together and when it was complete once again he had taken to blowing an odd note or two. Then he tried even more, imitating a bird's song, the sleepy murmur of the river, the wind in the trees. Now he played the song he had so put together note by note, combining the many voices of the dale itself. Hesitatingly he began, then grew more confident. Suddenly he was startled by a clapping of hands and jerked his head painfully around to see Gretta by the hedge.

"Play—oh, please play more, Ully! A body could dance as light as a wind-driven cloud to music like that."

She took up her full skirt in her hands and pointed her toes. But then Ully saw her smile fade, and he knew well her sorrow, the clumsy body which would not obey the lightness of mind. In a moment she was smiling again and ran to him, holding out her work-calloused hand.

"Such music we have never had, Ully. You must come along and play for us tonight!"

He shrank back, shaking his head, but Gretta coaxed. Then she called over her shoulder.

"Stephen, Will! Come help me with Ully, he can pipe sweeter than any bird in the bush. Let him play for our dancing tonight and we shall be as well served as they say the old ones were with their golden pipes!"

Somehow Ully could not refuse them, and Stephen and



Will pushed the cart up to the highest meadow where the token feast had been already spread on the offering rock and the fire flamed high. There Ully set pipe to lips and played.

But there were some not so well pleased at his coming. Morgana, having halted in the dance not far away, saw him and cried out so that Matt stepped protectingly before her.

"Ah, it's only crooked Ully," she cried spitefully. "I had thought it some one of the monsters out of the old tales crawled up from the woods to spy on us." And she gave an exaggerated shiver, clinging to Matt's arm.

"Ully?" Matt laughed. "Why does Ully crawl here, having no feet to dance upon? Why stare at his betters? And where did you get that pipe, little man?" He snatched at the pipe in Ully's hands. "It looks to me like the one I had to pay a round piece for when it was broken. Give it here now; for if it is the same, it belongs to me!"

Ully tried to hold on to the pipe, but Matt's strength was

by far the greater. The resting dancers had gathered close to the offering rock where they were opening their own baskets and bags to share the midnight feast. There was none to see what chanced here in the shadow. Matt held up the pipe in triumph.

"Good as new, and worth surely a silver piece again. Samkin the peddler will give me that and I shall not be out of pocket at all."

"My pipe!" Ully struggled to get it but Matt held it well out of his reach.

"My pipe, crooked man! I had to pay for it, didn't I? Mine to do with as I will."

Helpless anger worked in Ully as he tried to raise himself higher, but his movements only set the wheels of the cart moving and he began to roll down the slope of the meadow backward. Morgana cried out and moved as if to stop him. But Matt, laughing, caught her back.

"Let him go, he will come to no harm. And he has no place here now, has he? Did he not even frighten you?"

He put the pipe into his tunic and threw an arm about her waist, leading her back to the feast. Halfway they met Gretta.

"Where is Ully?"

Matt shrugged. "He is gone."

"Gone? But it is a long way back to the village and he—" She began to run down the slope of the hill calling, "Ully, Ully!"

The runaway cart had not gone that way, but in another direction, bumping and bouncing toward the small wood which encircled half the high meadow, its green arms held out to embrace the open land.

Ully crouched low, afraid to move, afraid to try to catch at any of the shrubs or low hanging branches as he swept by, lest he be pulled off to lie helpless on the ground.

In and out among the trees spun the cart, and Ully began to wonder why it had not upset, or run against a trunk or caught in some vine. It was almost as if it were being

guided. When he tried to turn and look to the fore, he could see nothing but the dark wood.

Then with a rush, the cart burst once more into the open. No fire blazed here, but the moon seemed to hang oddly bright and full just above, as if it were a fixed lamp. Heartened somehow, Ully dared to reach out and catch at a tuft of thick grass, a vine runner, and pulled the cart around so that he no longer faced the wood through which he had come, but rather an open glade where the grass grew short and thick as if it were mown. Around was a wall of flowers and bushes, while in the middle was a ring of stones, each taller than Ully, and so blazingly white in the moonlight that they might have been upright torches.

Ully's heart ceased to pound so hard. The peace and beauty of the place soothed him as if soft fingers stroked his damp face and ordered his tousled hair. His hands resting on his shrunken knees twitched, he so wanted his pipe.

But there was no pipe. Softly Ully began to hum his tune of the dale: bird song, water ripple, wind. Then his hum became a whistle. It seemed to him that all the beauty he had ever dreamed of was gathered here, just as he had fit together broken bits with his hands.

Great silvery moths came out of nowhere and sailed in and out among the candle pillars, as if they were weaving some unseen fabric, netting a spell. Hesitatingly Ully held out one hand and one of the moths broke from the rest and lit fearlessly on his wrist, fanning wings which might have been tipped with stardust for the many points of glitter there. It was so light he was hardly aware that it rested so, save that he saw it. Then it took to the air again.

Ully wiped the hand across his forehead, sweeping back a loose lock of hair, and as he did so . . .

The moths were gone; beside each pillar stood a woman. Small and slight indeed they were, hardly taller than a young child of Ully's kin, but these were truly women, for they were dressed only in their long hair. The bodies



revealed as they moved were so perfectly formed that Ullly knew he had never seen real beauty before. They did not look at him, but glided on their small bare feet in and out among the pillars, weaving their spell even as the moths had done. At times they paused, gathering up their hair with their two hands, to hold it well away from their bodies and shake it. It seemed to Ullly that when they did so there was a shifting of glittering motes carried along in a small cloud moving away from the glade, though he did not turn his eyes to follow it.

Though none of them spoke, he knew what they wanted of him and he whistled his song of the dale. He must truly be asleep and dreaming, or else in that wild dash downslope he had fallen from the cart and suffered a knock from which this vision was born. But dream or hurt, he would hold to it as long as he could. This—this was such happiness as he had never known.

At last their dance grew slower and slower, until they halted, each standing with one hand upon a pillar side. Then they were gone; only the moths fluttered once again in the dimming light.

Ullly was aware that his body ached, that his lips and mouth were dry, and that all the weight of fatigue had suddenly fallen on him. But still he cried out against its ending.

There was movement by the pillar directly facing him and someone came farther into the pale light of new dawn. She stood before him, and for the last time she gathered up her hair in both hands, holding it out shoulder high. Once, twice, thrice, she shook it. But this time there were no glittering motes. Rather he was struck in the face by a blast of icy air, knocked from his cart so his head rapped against the ground, dazing him.

He did not know how long it was before he tried to move. But he did struggle up, braced on his forearms. Struggle—he writhed and fought for balance.

Ullly who could not move his shriveled legs,



nor straighten his back—why—he was straight! He was as straight as Stephen, as Matt! If this were a dream . . .

He arched up, looked for the woman to babble questions, thanks, he knew not what. But there was no one by the pillar. Hardly daring to trust the fact that he was no longer bowed into a broken thing, he crawled, feeling strength flow into him with every move, to the foot of the pillar. He used that to draw himself to his feet, to stand again!

His clothes were too confining for his new body. He tore them away. Then he was erect, the pillar at his back and the dawn wind fresh on his body. Still keeping his hold on the white stone, he took small cautious steps, circling his support. His feet moved and were firm under him; he did not fall.

Ully threw back his head and cried his joy aloud. Then

he saw the glint of something lying in the center of the pillar circle and he edged forward. A sod of green turf was half uprooted, and protruding from it was a pipe. But such a pipe! He had thought the one he mended was fine; this was such as a high lord might treasure!

He picked it loose of the earth, fearing it might well disappear out of his very fingers. Then he put it to his lips and played his thanks to what, or who, had been there in the night; he played with all the joy in him.

So playing he went home, walking with care at first because it was so new to him. He went by back ways until he reached the cottage and his mother. She, poor woman, was weeping. They had feared him lost when he had vanished from the meadow and Gretta had aroused the others to search for him without result. When she first looked at this new Ully his mother judged him a spirit from the dead, until he reassured her.

All Coomb Brackett marveled at his story. Some of the oldest nodded knowingly, spoke of ancient legends of the old ones who had once dwelt in the dales, and how it was that they could grant blessings on those they favored. They pointed out symbols on the pipe which were not unlike those of the tribute rock. Then the younger men spoke of going to the pillar glade to hunt for treasure. But Ully grew wroth and they respected him as one set apart by what had happened, and agreed it was best not to trouble those they knew so little of.

It would seem that Ully had brought back more than straight legs and a pipe. For that was a good year in the dale. The harvest was the richest in memory, and there were no ill happenings. Ully, now on his two feet, traveled to the farthest homestead to mend and play, for the pipe never left him. And it was true that when they listened to it the feet of all grew lighter as did their hearts, and any dancer more skillful.

But inside Matt there was no rest. Now he was no longer first among the youth; Ully was more listened to. He began

## FANTASY STORIES

to talk to himself, hinting dire things about gifts from unknown sources, and a few listened, those who are always discontent to see another prosper. Among them was Morgana, for she was no longer so courted. Even Gretta nowadays was sometimes partnered before her. And one day she broke through Matt's grumbling shortly.

"What one man can do, surely another can also. Why do you keep muttering about Ully's fortune? Harvest Eve comes soon and those old ones are supposed then to come again to view the wealth of the fields and take their due. Go to Ully's pillars and play; they may be grateful again!"

Matt had been practicing on the pipe he had taken from Ully, and he did well enough with the rounds and the lays the villagers had once liked; though the few times he had tried to play Ully's own song the notes had come sourly, off-key.



The more Matt considered Morgana's suggestion, the better it seemed, and the old thought of treasure clung in his mind. There could be deals with the old ones if a man were shrewd. Ully was a simple fellow who had not known how to handle such. His thoughts grew ambitious.

So when the feast came Matt lagged behind the rest and turned aside to take a brambly way he judged would bring him to Ully's oft-described ring of pillars. Leaving much of his shirt hanging in tatters on the briars and his skin red-striped by thorns, he came at last into the glade.

There were the pillars right enough, but they were not bright and white and torchlike. Instead, each seemed to squat direfully in a mass of shadow which flowed about their bases as if something unpleasant undulated there. But Matt dropped down beneath one of the trees to wait. He saw no moths, though there were vague flutterings about the crowns of the pillars. At last, thinking Ully fashioned out of his own imagination much of his story, Matt decided to try one experiment before going back to the feasting villages to proclaim just how much a lie his rival was.

But the notes he blew on his pipe were shrill squeaks; and when he would have left, he found to his horror and dismay that he could not move, his legs were locked to the ground as Ully's had once been. Nor could he lower the pipe from his lips, but was compelled by a will outside his own to keep up that doleful, sorry wailing. His body ached, his mouth was dry, and fear was laid as a lash upon him. He saw things around those pillars.

He would close his eyes! But again he could not, but must pipe and watch, until he was close to the brink of madness. Then his leaden arms fell, the pipe spun away from his lax fingers, and he was dimly aware the dawn had come.

From the pillar before him sped a great bloated thing with an angry buzzing—such a fly as he had seen gather to drink the blood spilled at a butchering—yet this was greater than six of those put into one.

## FANTASY STORIES

---

It flew straight into his face, stinging him. He tried to beat it away, but could only manage to crawl on his hands and knees; the fly continued to buzz about him as a sheepdog might herd a straggler.

Somehow Matt finally struggled to his feet, but it was long before he could walk erect. For many days his face was so swollen that he would not show it in the village, nor would he ever tell what happened to him.

But for many a year thereafter Ully's pipe led the people of Coomb Bracket to their feasting and played for their dancing. Sometimes, it was known, he slipped away by himself to the place of pillars and there played for other ears, such as did not side mortal heads.

