

**LADY ISABELLA
SQUIRREL
AND THE BARD**

BY

TERRENCE P. MCGARTY

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May, Sweet
Breezes blow
softly upon the new
blooms in the garden.
The green is a green
like no others, the
green of the new leaves
before they have been
worn down by the
heavy sun of summer, a
green of new life and
rebirth. Plants, unlike

animals, have the
chance every year to
start over again, to
push out new growth
and to re-bloom in the
glory of a fresh sun

1 THE POTTING BEDS

The plants were in need of some restoration after their long and cold winter sleep. I was taking each of the pots up, clipping them and pulling the weeds which had managed to find homes amidst my flowers. Nature is a continuous battle between the beauty of human selection and the raw attack of the rest who seek protection and nurture. Weeds are nature's attack

force, the destabilizers of human imposed order.

I was going through each pot and as I soon discovered that each and every one was jam packed with acorns. Acorn after acorn after acorn. Some were already sprouting and others were just rotting there. I mumbled to myself, "What do these squirrels do with all of these nuts?"

I must have spoken a bit too loudly when behind me was the familiar voice of Antnee who said:

"Sir, do not blame all of us Sir, no indeed Sir, not all of us. For that collection Sir is from Nutty Nancy Sir, one whom we all have a bit of a caution towards Sir, one whom we stay back from, even her sweet husband Crazy Paulie Squirrel."

I turned and there was Antnee, atop the feeder, looking down upon me as I worked the pots. I turned and said:

"Nutty Nancy Squirrel, why do you call her that, is she a crazy squirrel?"

Antnee jumped down and sat atop a large pot sprouting the fennel plants. His fluffy gray furry spread out across the bright green fennel leaves as they were sprouting for the season. He replied:

"No Sir, she is called Nutty Nancy Sir because she goes about collecting everyone else's nuts for herself, just herself Sir, and then she decides who gets them. She says she has learned this type of behavior from your television Sir, perhaps you could explain to us where this is from."

I replied:

"Let me see if I understand this. Nutty Nancy goes about taking the nuts from other squirrels so that she can distribute them to other squirrels?"

Antnee replied:

"Indeed Sir, indeed, that is what she does. She wants to be in charge, Sir, she says you humans have people who are in charge and she wants to do this herself. Her poor husband Crazy Paulie has also fallen into such a way also Sir. You see Sir, Crazy Paulie is now taking over the old nests that are left by the many squirrel families from the last winter and trying to get new squirrels to pay him nuts so they can use them without needing to build their own. A very strange idea indeed Sir, very strange. Between Nutty Nancy collecting the nuts from others and Crazy Paulie taking the nests from

others, well Sir, we have a small problem."

I replied:

"Indeed you do, Antnee, greed, conflict, intrigue, and the like. And amongst squirrels at that!"

Antnee replied:

"Well Sir, I agree, but it is only those two, and we squirrels can adjust, they will be shunned, we all have our small difficulties Sir, small difficulties."

I replied:

"Well Antnee, it is almost Shakespearian in dimension, at least for squirrels. Oh I am sorry; perhaps the allusion to Shakespeare makes no sense..."

Before I could finish he smiled and jumped over to me and looked into my eyes, and then he started:

"Ah the Bard, Sir, you remind me of one of our clan."

At that moment, I knew I was in for another long and detailed history lesson about the squirrels. I was glad it was warm and still mid day, for I now knew that when Antnee looked at me like this I was in for a long but interesting tale.

Antnee started:

"Sir, you see, amongst all creatures there are stresses and indeed Sir the Bard was a great man in describing them. He of course, Sir was helped in his efforts by the good Lady Isabella Squirrel."

I was startled, for each of these tales was ever so more intriguing, but here I was meeting a regal squirrel, a Lady Isabella. I wondered where this one was to go. Starting from the local intrigue and greed of Nutty Nancy and Crazy Paulie, I had jumped five hundred years into the past. Well, it was Antnee and he told a great tale.

2 LADY ISABELLA

Antnee started his tale:

"You see Sir, Lady Isabella was the daughter of the Duke of Quercus. The Duke, her father, lived on the Royal estate at Greenwich, and the family had been given that from Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, during the last years of Henry II. The family had been there for four hundred years before Lady Isabella was born. They took care of the Royal Forest and under Henry

VIII, who was born there; they took care of young Henry in his youth. In fact young Queen Elizabeth also was taken care of by the Duke's ancestors as well."

Well I had heard many of these tales but this one was to be the most extreme. Here we now have a furry little animal as a titled part of the Royal household. No one would ever believe me on this one. If I told this tale to anyone, they would have me committed. Only an insane person, I believe, would even think this as possible. Yet here I was, settled down for another lecture by my neighborhood storyteller. A Duke, a Lady and the Royal household. There was no record of this but then again there never was a record of any of Antnee's tales, but he told them so well, and in so doing created both the

characters and their times, and after listening to him I oftentimes believed!

Antnee continued in his rather intense fashion:

"Lady Isabella was a fine young squirrel, with a beautiful coat and a smile that was filled with warmth. She was very bright and had befriended the Queen. You see Sir, Queen Elizabeth, she Sir, was aging, it was 1591, and she was under threat from many fronts. She ruled in difficult times Sir, many people sought her demise Sir, and she could trust very few humans. Yet we squirrels were always trusted Sir, always trusted. It was to Lady Isabella that the good Queen Elizabeth could talk, confide, and seek guidance. For the Lady Isabella Sir, she was so bright, and so faithful, that the Queen oftentimes used her for special missions, secret

missions Sir, ones that required the ultimate in trust and confidence."

I thought I was now starting upon one of the most complex tales that this gray furry friend had ever taken me on.

3 THE MISSION

Antnee thus went on as was his way, looking and talking at me, as if he were lecturing a young schoolchild at some old English Private school, a gray furry don, now engrossed with a history albeit foreign to us humans yet precious to my fine furry friends.

"You see Sir, Lady Isabella was one day summoned to Court at Whitehall palace by good Queen Elizabeth, for you see Sir, the two had become close, if I may say Sir, close friends. The Queen you see Sir, had great intrigues

at Court and there were few if any amongst her courtiers whom she could trust, very few indeed Sir, yet amongst all of their domain, they could always trust the squirrels, for we were loyal, true, and faithful servants. Thus on that fateful day young Lady Isabella entered the Court in her usual manner, across the tree tops, down the edge of the Palace, through the small hole in the roof which only the squirrels had knowledge of.

Then Lady Isabella entered the picture gallery of the Palace, she jumped across the tops of the frames as only an agile young squirrel could, then she entered the privy gallery, that long hall, jumping again so quickly from picture frame to picture frame, over the door frame where the Privy Council advised the Queen and jumping down she ran into the Queen's private rooms, past the Queen's own library,

for the Queen was an avid reader and into the Queen's private rooms. She was breathless.

She propped herself up atop the Queen's dressing table, panting yet not allowing herself to be seen in any form of distress and awaited to be addressed by the Queen, for protocol dictated that no one shall speak first before the Queen, only after one has been addressed.

The Queen was in her morning dressing gown, for she had awakened just a while ago, and her Chamber Maids had been dismissed. She turned and looked at Lady Isabella. She spoke:

"Lady Isabella, so good to see you, I hope I have not made you rush here too swiftly."

Lady Isabella replied:

"No your Majesty, I was just on the outside of the Palace, in the grounds, when I received your call, how may I be of assistance?"

The Queen replied:

"Last night, that young man, the actor and playwright, that Shakespeare of Stratford did you enjoy his play."

Lady Isabella, briefly wondered where this was going, the Queen was always circuitous in her questioning but perhaps this time she was just being direct. Thus, she responded:

"Your Majesty, he is quite delightful. He takes many of the classic themes we have seen before and uses words quite well and he has, what shall I say your Majesty, a way with phrases, a

way to say what is both obvious and not so obvious, all at the same time."

The Queen smiled and then spoke to Lady Isabella:

"Well put my loyal friend. Thus, I have a task for you. The good Master Shakespeare lives in Bishopsgate and the theatre is The Theatre, just a bit north of the area. I think he would do well to move to Southwark, get a home there, and I could see him from time to time, perhaps have you communicate with him, for I have ideas for several new works. For he builds upon old plays and the works of Plutarch, and that man Holinshed and his Chronicles, he talks of the royals as he did in his plays of Richard III and those of Henry VI. I wish he continues but I also wish he expresses for our pleasure and our crown slight nuances, shall we say, slight emphases, that

only he is so well adept at doing. Thus, go off quickly, advise him of my wishes, and let him know that I shall make him a new theater in Southwark and that he is to reside there as well. This will allow many to go back and forth. For there is now little on the south side of the Thames of interest, yet the bridge does connect and the boats are many and yield great ease of transport. Let the good Master Shakespeare know of our wishes. Then we shall work with the young man, and he will be our mouth to the people, for through him we can certainly say what we could hardly do for the Palace. Go Lady Isabella, go and see this Master Shakespeare."

At this point Antnee was in the full story-telling mode and I was now enthralled. His detail and wholly unlikely tale was taking on monumental substance. Here I was

sitting upon my small wooden bench amidst my flowers listening to a gray squirrel speak authoritatively of Queen Elizabeth herself, in details that I had hardly ever thought of. The tale was becoming a real portrayal, a reality in time of true characters. He continued:

Lady Isabella then bid the Queen farewell and then she jumped out the window of the palace. She would try the fast way to Bishopsgate, she would go to the Thames and hop across the many boats crossing and then to London Bridge and up towards Bishopsgate.

Off she went, the boatmen paying no attention as she hopped from one small boat to another, quietly hiding in the stern as they rowed their passengers back and forth, the river busy as an ant hill with small boats, then large ships, the cargo coming and

going from this great port of London, the Thames flowing and still somewhat salty even this far inland, and the human refuse floating in and on the Thames as it was being thrown out by its ever growing residents.

There was the London Bridge, the only crossing of the River other than the boats, she hopped up the side of the stones and then across the top of the bridge. Now on to Bishopsgate.

4 MEETING THE BARD

At this point Antnee was fully engrossed in telling his tale. He clearly was enamored of Lady Isabella, a truly royal squirrel on a mission. He now was standing on all fours, as was his wont, and he walked back and forth telling the tale. He had now taken the true story tellers approach, now and then looking into my eyes with those

slightly side looking brown squirrel eyes, and then pacing without even a nod, telling the tale ever so more intensely. He went on:

"She was cautious going from the London Bridge and up towards Bishopsgate, then beyond the old Roman wall that was around the city, through the old gate, now left torn asunder as the buildings were continually expanded and to The Theatre. She jumped across the trees and into the rafters that covered the parts of the Theatre where the audience sat. She looked around and down. Below here was a play in preparation, and the players were those of The Chamberlain's men, the troupe of Master Shakespeare. The Chamberlains Men were sponsored by the Chamberlain, using the good name as the protector, and little did they

know that they had become secretly The Queen's Men.

Lady Isabella sat quietly observing trying to understand who this man William Shakespeare was and why the good Queen was taking such an interest. For Lady Isabella had seen the good Queen's was aging, she was stressed by many things and the burden of ruling the ever growing England, the stress of the foreign powers and their unending threats and moreover the never ceasing political fights within her own walls was tiring. She found not only solace in this man's words but she found vision and strength. Lady Isabella wanted to know why and she wanted to bring that strength and solace to the good Queen.

Here was Master Shakespeare, a man of medium height, modest build, no portly figure he, yet well fed, a balding

head, for humans had so many problems with their hair, not a squirrel problem, and he had a long narrow face with a sharp nose and bearded to a point on the chin. He had blue eyes and he walked and strutted about the stage with the excitement of a chipmunk in a feed patch. He would work his words and then he listened as they were spoken. The sounds were critical, the resonance, the sweetness or the sense of fear and panics, his words created moods, resonated with feelings. She sat for two hours as they practiced for the next play.

Then she decided that she would see the play, a play called the Merchant of Venice.

She sat there as the characters came out, one after the other, the conflicts, the stress, the human nature being so well told.

The audience sat there, masses of humans, smoking their pipes, the smell of tobacco wafting over the audience, men and women in large hats, with people behind them getting up to see the play, drinks of various types, and humans going off to the side to relieve themselves. The smells, the noise, the colors, what a mass of involved humanity.

Lady Isabella watched in awe as the characters, Portia, and her soon to be wedded Bassanio went back and forth, Bassanio borrowing money from Antonio who in turn goes to the ruthless moneylender Shylock, who in turn decides to take no interest but if Antonio fails to pay he must deliver a pound of his flesh!

At this point Antnee turned to me with a rather pained look on his face. He said:

"Antonio, that is Antnee, my namesake, a pound of flesh! How horrible, for I am a mere pound all by myself! Where did Shakespeare ever get this tale, I have often wondered Sir, do you know?"

I could see Antnee was grieved at what had been said, his own tale, and I could see that must often have thought about this tale. I replied:

"Antnee, I have no idea, it is a gruesome thought. I know it also goes to the heart of this play for I have seen it many times."

He replied:

"Indeed Sir, but each time I come to this part, Sir, so cruel, so cruel. Yet let me continue Sir."

He went on:

"Then the tale thickens with others all so entwined and ends somewhat happily for all the couples save Shylock who is driven by his sense of greed at all costs.

Lady Isabella watched as Portia, disguised as a lawyer pleads the case of the good Antonio, due to his failure to pay Shylock, and then Shylock demanded his pound of flesh from Antonio, and Portia, pleads for him at the trial.

Antnee then interjects:

"Sir, here is a wonderful part, as Portia pleads for Antonio. Sir, the words Sir,

listen to them, for they are like the soft and warm spring winds against the new soft leaves, so soft, yet strong Sir."

He continued with the speech.

"Portia speaks:

*The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from
heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that
takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it
becomes
The throned monarch better than his
crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal
power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of
kings;*

*But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show
likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.*

Lady Isabella could hear the words, she now could understand the human talent of mercy, she was part of the pleading crowd, and she could see the audience in total silence, she saw the reaction of the audience to this plea before a false court, by a young man dressed as a young woman, but they suspended reality and for a brief moment the audience was there in that court and heard the pleading, and when all turned out well they cheered. Now Lady Isabella could best understand what the good Queen liked.

The play ended and the cast departed leaving Shakespeare alone on the stage writing some notes under the light of a globe lamp. Lady Isabella jumped from her perch and down towards the stage and ran to confront this master of words face to face. She jumped up on the outer edge of the large oaken table and was beside the globe lamp and then said:

"Master Shakespeare, I am Lady Isabella Squirrel, daughter of the Duke of Quercus and I am here to speak with you upon demand of the good Queen Elizabeth."

I thought for a moment, as Antnee enacted this tale with gusto, if at all true, what it may have been like when Shakespeare sees a furry red squirrel, talking, and more importantly when she says she is a Lady and from the Queen.

He must have thought he had lost all sanity!

Antnee could see I was, well not bemused but perhaps bewildered and he said:

"Sir, keep with me Sir, for this tale has just begun, and you must be with each and every detail Sir, for indeed it is that way and that way only that you will see the full import of what I impart today!"

I had been lectured and thus I would obey. Yet the images were flying inside my brain. Antnee continues:

Shakespeare looks up and sees Lady Isabella. Surprised, shocked, possibly feeling possessed, he actually replies:

"You, my fine red haired friend are talking to me. A squirrel, talking! I

must be working too hard or this wine must be much too strong. It may be some evil spirit come to possess my soul. Begone you evil creature! Begone!"

Lady Isabella was not used to being spoken to that way, especially by a commoner. Squirrel or not she was to take possession of the situation. You see as a Royal she had been raised that she had certain rights, for alone amongst all creature squirrels were allowed to sit before the monarch, not even the Monarch's highest Dukes and Barons were honored such. Well Lady Isabella thought I must take control here. She replied in her most authoritative manner:

"Master Shakespeare, beware how you talk to a Lady of the Court, for I am the good Queen's confidant and I have been sent here on a mission from her.

You my good Sir are all too abrupt and presumptive. I am not, I repeat sir, I am not some evil vision. I am a loyal subject of her Majesty the Queen Elizabeth I and so my good man are you. Hold your tongue and listen what I have to convey from her Majesty!"

Well did that set Shakespeare sitting upright? He was now sober as a judge and his heart was ticking as if he had truly seen a ghost!

Lady Isabella then went on:

"Master Shakespeare, her Majesty really does desire that your new theatre be in Southwark. As you know, the prison, the Clink, abuts the Thames, and there is great room behind the Clink, room for your new theatre. Her Majesty suggest you call it The Globe, for all the world, for her Majesty!"

She continued:

"And Master Shakespeare, her Majesty also asked that I convey to you from time to time, certain ideas for plays and themes that her Majesty would greatly like to see in your plays. She knows from whence you draw your themes and drawing from others as well would be compliant with your actions as they are as now. Yet her Majesty has some needs that you alone can meet the need to inform the public of the Crown, as you did in your play today. I felt strongly of the good Portia, a deliverer of justice, a good judge, a woman Sir, as is our good Queen. Her Majesty seeks that I be that confidant between her and your works."

Shakespeare was now drawing in the full import of what was before him. He

now understood that this fine small creature had almost royal stature, red fur notwithstanding.

He replied:

"Lady Isabella, you can tell her Majesty the Queen that I William Shakespeare will be her humble servant and I greatly appreciate both her confidence and her guidance."

Antnee then finished by saying:

"Thus Sir began the Majestic Collaboration, the working between Queen and playwright."

5 THE GREAT PRINCE HAL

Antnee then continued:

"The first play Sir, one of your favorites Sir, about good King Hal, and

the glorious victory of the Kings army against the French at Agincourt in 1415."

The winter of 1598 was a cold winter. It snowed and the skies were dark and gray. The plays went on, and Shakespeare had a great deal to do as the Globe was under construction.

One day in late November, Lady Isabella came to Shakespeare in his new residence near the Globe in Southwark near Bankside. His new home was close to the Clink, the prison for London, and just a few small streets from the London Bridge. He was a few steps from the Globe but Bankside was unlike the City of London, for there were no covered streets and in the wet London winters, there was heavy mist and other messes afoot. There always was a sloshing from one location to another and

whenever one went from their dwelling to the theater the result was mud splashed everywhere. The cold was that damp piercing winter cold that made London famous and there was the smoke from the ever-growing number of fires in the dwellings and shops. There also was the almost ever-present fog that crept up from the river and hung aside each building.

Lady Isabella was in a hurry, the Queen had sent her on a mission. The Earl of Essex had been causing problems, he was to have handled disruptions in Ireland but he was slowly disregarding the Queen and delaying his assigned mission. Essex was clearly a thorn in the side of the good Queen and she must do something. The 1588 victory of the Armada was now well behind the Queen and the past ten years had taken its toll. She clearly was aging and she needs to bolster the people. A play

was the solution, a call to arms, a call to the Queen.

Thus, the good Queen had an idea for a play, a twist in how it could be done to help her, to motivate her people, and to disgrace Essex. This was Lady Isabella's task on this rainy day. She scampered from rooftop to rooftop.

Arriving at Bankside Lady Isabella saw that Shakespeare was alone and she jumped in thru the window. She said:

"Ah Master Shakespeare, we have a project from the Queen we two, we have a royal commission, a secret royal commission."

Shakespeare was now all too familiar with this tiny messenger and he thus treated her as due her position, an immediate extension of the Royals. He replied:

"Lady Isabella, and how is her Majesty this dreary day?"

Lady Isabella responded:

"Fine but to work, to work, Master Shakespeare, we have a crisis. We need a new play. You have heard of the grief the Queen has with Essex, we must join that with a play."

Shakespeare responded:

"And do "we" have any suggestions?"

She looked sternly at his face and continued without the slightest hesitation:

"Master Shakespeare, we do, we will do Henry V."

"A play about the wild young partying prince, another Falstaff tale?"

For the Henry that was well known as the cheerful and drinking Harry or Hal, and the rotund Falstaff, his sidekick and co-conspirator, who would hang happily about London's drinking establishments and avoiding any of their responsibilities. Comedies were made of these tales not heroic exhortations.

Lady Isabella replied:

"No Master Shakespeare, we need a Henry as leader as king as we have Good Queen Elizabeth. We want the people not to question but to follow. The good Queen needs to see Henry as the beloved and the leader and the king. Not young Harry the easy living prince. Now Master Shakespeare, let me tell you how the good Queen

wishes the play to go. Your words are most important. We must make him look like a great king, beloved and great. The good Queen says we must make him deal with the battle of Agincourt and his victory; it must make that victory a stimulus to support our good Queen. Do you see Master Shakespeare?"

Shakespeare responded:

"Indeed I do Lady Isabella; we begin to write now..."

They then spend days and nights, writing and talking, for words were the medium, and Lady Isabella would, take parts back to Whitehall were the Queen was, the Queen would read and comment, and Lady Isabella would go back again, and this was almost endless. After two months, poor Lady Isabella was weather worn, crossing

back and forth with Shakespeare's words, then the Queen's comments, then discussing them, and then again and again. She was near exhaustion.

Shakespeare was told by the Queen to make the Irish, Welsh, Scots and English fight as one. Thus, Shakespeare made four Captains one from each land, fighting together against the French. Then Antnee turned to me and said:

"Sir, you know Sir that Shakespeare at the Queen's insistence made the Captain of the English a Gower, as was Lady Sara's family, and Sir the Irish was a Morris as was your clan. Interesting Sir that your clan and the good Lady Sara's clan fought side by side at Agincourt."

I was amazed, for Antnee always knew how to drag you into the story, you

were now connected to the Battle of Agincourt as Captains under Henry V expressly named! I was amazed having seen the play many times that I had never made that connection but here was my furry friend bringing it to my attention.

Antnee then continued:

Then they started to read the play. They reached the exhortation of Henry at Agincourt. Lady Isabella then said to Shakespeare:

"Master Shakespeare, please read this one more time, for the good Queen thinks that our words are a true exhortation."

Shakespeare then stood and in his best voice said:

*We few, we happy few, we band of
brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with
me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition.
And gentlemen in England, now abed,
Shall think themselves accursed they
were not here;
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles
any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint
Crispin's day.*

In late March 1599, just at the end of Lent, in the palace at Richmond, Shakespeare presented the play.

Shakespeare could see that the Queen was most impressed. She smiled at the end of the scene, and he knew that her words had been heeded and that indeed they did add well to the work. He saw the Queen look upwards from

the great room and towards the rafters, ever so slightly and there was Lady Isabella in all her glory sitting and clapping her small paws in appreciation for what Master Shakespeare had done, When Lady Isabella saw the Queen's glance of appreciation, she bowed her head in appreciation ever so slightly that Shakespeare alone could now the great and deep bond between Lady and Queen.

6 THE ENIGMATIC JULIUS

The April rains made the surface of the Thames ripple with waves, the ships endlessly tilling their paths back and forth, the gray sheets of wind whipped water splashing into the window of Shakespeare's new residence in Bankside. The warmth of spring had not yet arisen from the earth, which still held tightly to the

gritty cold of a long and chilling winter. Then suddenly a tapping at the window, and Shakespeare knew who would be there.

He opened the window and behold, the soaked Lady Isabella, red fur clumped in patches, muddy paws from the paths below, and mud even splattered across her small nose. She looked a fright.

She, without a word, jumped in and went to the corner where Shakespeare had a warm fireplace. She shook herself, spraying water to and fro and then carefully groomed herself free of the spoils of the street.

She almost as if as a result of some miracle turned back into the elegant Lady Isabella that Shakespeare knew well. At that point she spoke:

"To work, Master Shakespeare, to work. For we have another play and as we did with young Henry, we must do here. We shall, at the request of her Majesty, write about Julius Caesar!" Shakespeare then asked:

"'Tis good to see you again Lady Isabella..."

She immediately cut him off, as a Royal is often wont to do, saying:

"No time for pleasantries, no time Master Shakespeare. You are safe here in Bankside but at Whitehall, Master Shakespeare, at Whitehall, there are many plots and schemes. We must tell the people, yet we must educate them. The fear Master Shakespeare is the Earl of Essex. The Queen has allowed him an army to deal with the Irish, yet the Queen is concerned that Essex with an army may try to overthrow the

monarchy. Master Shakespeare we must tell the people of this fear, yet do so subtly, for Essex has many friends who could twist the words of the Queen, we on the other hand good Master Shakespeare, we it seems, as we had done with good King Harry, can twist the public in our way. Thus on to Julius Caesar."

They went about this play with massive power for it must be true but subtle, of the current time but well hidden in Rome. Lady Isabella ensured that Shakespeare used the best knowledge of Rome, the Senate, the Republic, and did not allude in any way to the day at hand. For it must portray a tyrant, a usurper, but must retain dignity. For on the one hand it must praise the dignity of the emperor while shielding the tyrant but little from scorn.

As before, as sections were prepared, Lady Isabella would affix them in her mouth, then again the trip across the Thames, then to Whitehall and to the Queen's bedchamber, and in the silence of the night of Whitehall, a silence that under penalty of death could only be broken, the two, well out of the ears of any, worked night after night, and then in the morning Lady Isabella would again take the changes and jump from the window, down to the edge of the Thames, hop aboard a boat ordered by the Queen, and across to Bankside, up around the wall of the Clink and to the window of Master Shakespeare.

Then they tried two orations, one of special interest to the Queen was that of Antony after Brutus had assassinated Caesar.

Antnee turned to me and smiled, and he said:

"Sire, you see Sir, Antony is a great man, at the hand of the Queen, Lady Isabella and the great Master Shakespeare. I, Sir, am named after that Antony, a favorite of the Queen and of Lady Isabella, a great name is it not Sir, a very great name!"

I smiled and said:

"Yes Antnee, a great name and one so well deserved."

He smiled and then went without interruption back to the tale.

The Lady Isabella, acting as Antony read the oration:

*Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me
your ears;*

*I come to bury Caesar, not to praise
him.
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their
bones;
So let it be with Caesar. The noble
Brutus
Hath told you Caesar was ambitious:
If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
And grievously hath Caesar answer'd
it.
Here, under leave of Brutus and the
rest--
For Brutus is an honourable man;
So are they all, all honourable men--
Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.
He was my friend, faithful and just to
me:
But Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man.*

Shakespeare smiled, his beard curled up the sides of his chin and the end of his goatee stuck out with glee! He said:

"Well done fair Lady Isabella, well done, for I can see the power of this speech. I believe we have it. The Queen will be happy. I only regret that I cannot place you upon the stage, you do so well. Unfortunately the law only allows for men upon the stage, perhaps someday it will change."

Lady Isabella said:

"Master Shakespeare, perhaps it is perchance that I am a squirrel may also be of concern, may it not?"

Shakespeare laughed heartily, and said:

"I am forgetting that!"

The two finished the play and in early June back at Whitehall they performed the play for the Queen. As before, Lady

Isabella took her place and she and the Queen were quite pleased. The people grasped the threat of the Earl of Essex, unfortunately, the Earl did not grasp the words of Shakespeare, the Lady Isabella or the Queen!

7 HAMLET THE PRINCE

I had to take a break, the tales were so interesting and Antnee told them with such gusto that it became like a whirlwind. He clearly wished to continue, for he always told the whole story. I spoke briefly to pace the tales:

"Antnee, again I am amazed as to the detail, your memory is superb. It is truly astonishing."

He replied:

"Then I shall continue Sir, shall I not?"

I interjected,

"Perhaps Antnee before we continue you may enlighten me as to why all these plays were so important, I understand the problem with the Earl of Essex, but why the plays?"

Antnee saw that I had asked a question which he could again enlighten me, for he was now treating me more as his student than his feeder. He walked back and forth on all fours, his gray tail flapping left and right, as if an aid to his thought and then he turned, sat upon his haunches and began as if he had not missed a beat:

"You see Sir, in those times there were no newspapers, no television, a dreadful invention of you humans, no computers, a rather useful invention even if I say so myself, and one would have to be careful as to what one said,

Sir, since the Queen, and even others might take serious offense. Even the Queen, Sir, she could not say what was on her mind so to say Sir, for even she had to walk carefully so as to maintain her alliances. These alliances Sir shifted like sands in the winds, the blow and twist about and at times Sir could become most dreadful. Therefore, Sir, one spoke in nuances, not in whispers, but in metaphors, and yet all knew what you were speaking of."

I then replied:

"Well these are all Kings, of sorts, Henry and Julius, well let's continue, what other work did Lady Isabella assist on?"

Antnee was now pleased, I was getting back on topic. He waved at me to sit down, as if I were some student in his

class, and here I was sitting in front of my lecturer, tail upright, on his haunches, arms out stretched, wiggling his nose in preparation for his greatest lesson. He began:

"Hamlet Sir, yes another royalty, and this time Sir, a true tragedy. But one of if not the greatest play ever written, Sir, even if I do say so myself!"

I paused for a moment to take in the import of what had been said. Here I was in the midst of my continuing lecture and here was this squirrel making me now fully believe that his opinion was of such value that I a mere human should absorb each word. And here I was doing so, a bit of irony.

I asked Antnee:

"Why is this play so important?"

Antnee smiled and waddled closer to me, looking up into my face, like a miniature Buddha, round bellied from the winters oil rich seed, and fluffy coat of fine hair, and he said:

"Sir, the truly magnificent difference here is that Hamlet looks in unto himself Sir, a truly different view. Unlike Henry, Caesar, and all the others which look upon others, look upon the world as people interacting with people, Hamlet looks upon the man interacting with himself, the conversations are with himself, they are inward Sir, and this Sir, indeed this very play Sir, is the first time that such a look inside oneself occurred. It was in many ways the defining moment Sir between the Medieval mind and the Renaissance mind, the mind of looking at things and ideas and the mind Sir of understanding ourselves!"

I was aghast. Here was my philosopher squirrel. I must be going out of my mind. I thought that if I ever spoke of this to anyone that they would consider me out of my mind, not in any way looking into my mind. Tales of fluffy little squirrels and funny tales of adventures are one thing but having a philosophical lecture by a backyard animal was now quite something else. Yet I let him continue since he was making a great deal of sense, yet I was hardly a Shakespearian scholar, and I was just a mere attendee at the plays like some many of the plebeians of London.

Antnee then started to unfold the tale, having lectured me as to the true importance. He continued:

"You see Sir, the Earl of Essex had been sending threatening message to his friends in London that he sought to

have the Queen removed and James the King of Scotland put in her place. This was treason Sir, true and bold faced treason. Yet the Queen, she was aged and she was listening to far too many advisors Sir, she hesitated."

"You see Sir that the Earl of Essex left to fight in Ireland in March of 1599, he even did so the very afternoon Shakespeare was playing Henry V in the new Globe! He used that as a, what would you say Sir, a sending off greeting. He knew the Queen had other intents for the play but he usurped it for his own ends. An bad thing Sir, indeed, quite a bad thing. Yet what could the good Queen do!"

"Then that fall Sir, a ghastly thing happens. The Earl of Essex returns to London, not having accomplished his task, and he goes to the palace at Nonsuch and Sir, it is horrible to even imagine, he bursts upon the

bedchamber of good Queen Elizabeth, for she was not yet even up, she was ill, and failing, and slams his way in, and demands from her of all sorts of things. That Sir was truly the end, truly the end, indeed she must now act. And act she did, she had him jailed, yet he had many friends Sir, many who would conspire and seek revenge. A very tense time it was Sir, so very intense."

"The Queen did not wish to act too abruptly for she knew not of his allies. She had him confined and then she need prepare the people, thus again Lady Isabella and the good Master Shakespeare. They were to write and tell of intrigue, revenge, and do so in a new and penetrating manner. Sir, you see, the Queen was a very insightful person, age had taken away from the body but had added to the mind. Somewhat like your Sir."

I stopped this tale promptly. I was not to be told I was infirmed by a squirrel. I replied:

"My good furry friend, now you just wait, I am the Queen's age but this is four hundred years later and I am in great physical condition! I beg to differ with your scurrilous remarks!"

Antnee replied:

"You mean squirrelous remarks!"

He then tittered away knowing he had just told a joke. A joke telling squirrel, off to Atlantic City with him!

He continued:

"Now Sir, back to the tale. Thus did the Queen again summon Lady Isabella. They spoke and the Queen asked Lady Isabella to set out to Master

Shakespeare, for they must do a play on the Prince of Denmark, afar from England, but close and known. The play must look at why the Prince does what he does, the play must not so much deal with the facts, historical facts, but must deal with how people think, and thus why they do what they do. It would make people think of the Earl of Essex as a self centered greedy many seeking to dethrone the good Queen. Then and only then could the good Queen deal with the evil Earl."

"Thus did Lady Isabella Sir, strike out upon her mission. As she had done before, she went to Shakespeare and informed him of the need. The two of them then discussed the play, and Shakespeare worked tirelessly portraying the prince of Denmark, they talked back and forth of bringing his very mind, if not his should Sir, into

the play. The torture and the end results."

Antnee was now on a roll. He continued:

"That scene Sir, wit Hamlet looking deeply into himself, let me see, Sir, all we squirrels have remitted this to our memory, for Sir, it was a true joint effort of Lady Isabella and the Bard."

And Antnee stood atop his wooden plank and raised his little paw into the air and began:

*To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to
suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous
fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of
troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to*

sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand
natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a
consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay,
there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams
may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal
coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would bear the whips and
scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud
man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's
delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy
takes,

When he himself might his quietus
make
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels
bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after
death,

When he finished, he dropped his paw, lowered his head, there appeared bits of squirrel sweat upon his small wet nose, he was rent. A magnificent performance, better than Olivier, and unfortunately not one I could tell many about! But Bravo Antnee!

8 AS YOU LIKE IT

After the success of the three plays, the Queen was satisfied. Lady Isabella would from time to time revisit her friend Master Shakespeare.

On one occasion, they were talking and Lady Isabella said:

"Master Shakespeare, after all our work on plays, and after all my time at the palace, I see that plays and real life are at time one and the same. People act, in plays and in life."

Shakespeare then replied:

"Ah Lady Isabella, indeed they do. We have discussed this you and I and I have just finished a play. I call it As You Like It. You gave me some ideas. This tale is about people playing other people playing other people. I had read the tale by Thomas Lodge, the romance, Rosalind, who Lodge did say was from Chaucer himself, The Tale of Ganylon, and I did find this tale one to twist and turn how people play as actors, depending upon the moment

and also upon the whim." Let me read you one of the words:

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely
players:
They have their exits and their
entrances;
And one man in his time plays many
parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the
infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's
arms.
And then the whining school-boy, with
his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping
like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the
lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful
ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a
soldier,*

*Full of strange oaths and bearded like
the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in
quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then
the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon
lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal
cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age
shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on
side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world
too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big
manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble,
pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of*

*all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere
oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans
everything.*

Lady Isabella smiled and said:

"Master Shakespeare, so well said as usual. A Comedy, indeed, but one with a twist as is your usual manner. Indeed, all the world's a stage, and we are all actors upon that stage. Tell me more, Master Shakespeare, tell me more."

They spent hours with Shakespeare telling of Rosalind, and Orlando, and of Oliver and of Frederick, of Celia and the Duke and the many people in the land of the Forest of Arden. The people playing roles in a play to fool the other players and then to get back

again into their original role. Humorous, a fine witted story but with a moral within.

9 THE DUCHESS OF PINUS

Antnee then interjected:

"And now Sir, a part of the tae of which we are most proud, indeed Sir most proud. For her service Lady Isabella was made a Royal, on her own merits, a true Duchess Sir, a true Duchess."

I was amazed as to Antnee's true and total devotion to Isabella, now to be a Duchess, and not knowing anything about royalty gave my fullest attention. He continued:

"As the Queen was aging, she called Lady Isabella into her bed chamber one day. Lady Isabella saw the Queen was

fading, that her end was nearing, she was losing strength, her skin sallow, and her eyes were watering with old age. She was not dressed as was her wont but was still in her bed clothes.

Lady Isabella approached and bowed as was her custom and awaited the Queen to speak. Slowly and with clear effort the Queen started:

"Lady Isabella, good and long friend, we have accomplished a great deal together. My works, and our works, and of course those with Master Shakespeare. I wish to thank you for all your efforts. I know your father has passed on and your older brother is now Duke of Quercus. But my dear friend, I wish to reward you for not only your friendship and loyalty but for your accomplishments. For the words in Henry V, Julius Caesar, and Hamlet, those words I know are yours,

mine and Master Shakespeare. For that, all our other works here on earth may pale, I truly believe that those three works shall prevail. For that we should be proud, for mankind will hear them again and again, and it will make them think again and again, to praise a good king, to beware of the usurper, and then be careful to control our revenge."

Lady Isabella bowed before the aging Queen, as she was perched on the end of the bedposts looking down across the topped bed where the Queen was lying. She said:

"Many glorious adventures your Majesty, and Master Shakespeare is indeed a good and close friend."

The Queen replied:

"As are you Lady Isabella. For that reason I am making you the Duchess of Pinus, and you shall have domain over all this Kingdom, as does your brother the Duke of Quercus. For at heart the help of men and women are equal. As in your brother's descent the title goes from son to son, it shall be in yours that the title goes from daughter to daughter. You shall have residence at Greenwich, and so I proclaim."

Isabella responded:

"My deepest thanks to your Majesty, I and my descendents shall be forever in your debt and shall continue to serve the Crown."

The Queen then said:

"Come here Isabella."

And Lady Isabella jumped across the bed sheets to the pillow where the Queen lay. The Queen drew Lady Isabella close, the two hugged.

10 THE DEATH OF THE QUEEN

Antnee then appeared a bit sad, strange for my friend, and he curled up in a ball, as if both resting and hiding, to continue the tale. He said:

"Now Sir, a sad part, but inevitable Sir, always inevitable. You see Sir the good Queen had reached the end of her days, and as she slowly faded, the tale of Lady Isabella, now the Duchess of Pinus, pause for this passing of such a good friend. We always find this a sad part Sir, so I thought I would advise you, but we see this also as the strong bond between we two, squirrels and man, friendship that lasts Sir, like you are me, am I correct Sir."

I smiled and reached out to rub his furry little head and responded:

"Indeed my good friend, indeed, we are true and loyal friends. Now on with the tale, all things change."

He replied:

"Well said Sir, well said, now to the tale."

"In March 1603, the winter lingered, the skies remained gray, and the Queen was weakening. The Duchess of Pinus knew that the time for her parting was near. She was to lose a Queen and a good friend. She felt great sadness. There would be many changes but alas she would go on, for she had committed to the Queen and would stay until released by the Queen's successor."

She had been with the Queen every evening and this evening as she approached, she could see that the final weakness had arrived. Her breathing was slow, her face lacking any color, almost a transparent parchment, absorbing light and reflecting nothing back. The shell was becoming empty.

When the Queen was alone after her staff had left she jumped down upon the Queen's pillow, and for once she spoke first, breaking all protocol.

She said:

"Your Majesty, you are so pale and wane, Is there anything I may do?"

The Queen, tired and pale, turned her head, her eyes still bright blue but now

almost transparent, smiled and replied:

"Duchess, you address me first, I suspect that you know my time is here. Alas, I have much to be grateful for, I have accomplished much and I die with my head upon my shoulders."

They both laughed. The Queen continued:

"Let my successor know that he also has your trust and devotion. Your guidance is a welcome thing. And tell our friend Master Shakespeare that I shall miss him, he was a great help in times of need, and his plays a great enjoyment during troubled periods. Now my good Duchess, you must raise a family, be not like me and be childless, return to Greenwich and tell our tales. They are so important."

The Duchess of Pinus nuzzled to the Queen and slept at her head for the remainder of the night. Her breathing slowed, and then, the time came, and she breathed no longer. The Duchess of Pinus gave one final kiss to the cheek of her Queen, and as people entered the room, she swept herself behind the bed-board, up the post, out the window, and she sought the comfort across the Thames with good Master Shakespeare. The world would change, it never stops.

11 THE PARTING WITH THE BARD

This was a telling tale and now Antnee again shuffled about to continue. He said:

"Again Sir, a tale of parting, but on moving on, not leaving. You see Sir, the Duchess was to leave the Palace, for the new King James had treated all

well, a fine King he was. Then the Duchess must go to Greenwich. So she must bid farewell to Master Shakespeare. To this tale of farewell I now move Sir. A bit sad but like all of life Sir, we see change, otherwise Sir it would indeed be dull."

Antnee then went on with the tale:

The Duchess of Pinus spent a year with the new King James I. A different person than the Queen, but all are different. At first he, like all monarchs took time to adjust, but he was fond of the works of Master Shakespeare and from the start that was the nexus. For after a short while, The Chamberlains Men became The Kings Men. Thanks to The Duchess of Pinus.

After the end of a year, the Duchess had brought in her cousin, the Lady Portia, named after one of Master

Shakespeare's characters, and Lady Portia was to take her place. She bade farewell to the new King, King James, and before she departed she would visit Master Shakespeare one more time. King James gave her the use of a boat, which she used to go one last time to Bankside, and from there to Greenwich. It was a sunny day, early June 1604, and off she went.

She disembarked at Bankside, and scampered up to meet Master Shakespeare, for he was busy at the Globe. There at the Globe, a fine wooden structure, rounded on the outside, built of sturdy planks, thatched roofing, and a play being had. It was Othello, one she had seen before, but she scampered to the top of the balcony and took her usual spot, watching and listening till the end. The words, the spoken words, like rippling water, fresh, clear and uplifting.

Then after the play she scampered down to meet the Bard. He smiled and asked:

"I suppose you are off to look after family matters now my Duchess?"

She replied:

"Yes good Master Shakespeare, and I shall sorely miss our discussions. The good Queen did provide us with exciting times, a brisk year that 1599, brisk and so enjoyable. I shall remember your words always."

Shakespeare smiled and replied:

"Our words, you mean Duchess, all three of us. We were a great team!"

She replied:

"Indeed we were, but alas, and for good, Master Shakespeare, your words improve and do better. Othello is a fine work, fine indeed. You have not slowed. I am pleased."

They spoke for a while longer and finally caressed softly and bade farewell.

The Duchess went down to her boat and departed to do her family duties.

Antnee looked up at me with a smile, he again had a tear dropping off his nose. He was a marvelous story teller, whether this was embellished over the centuries or not, it was a wonderful tale. He then said:

"A wonderful tale Sir, indeed, Sir a wonderful tale. Such good friends, Sir, such good friends indeed. And in such trying times. Their friendship lasts and

their words remain Sir, truly great words. And indeed Sir, that year of 1599 was a frightfully productive year Sir, as I am certain you have yourself experienced!"

I sat back a moment and thought. Yes indeed, there have been such times, times with good friends where we did monumental tasks, tasks which lasted and have lingered well beyond their immediate time. I saw that Antnee was both a story teller and a seer of the human and perhaps the squirrel spirit as well.

12BACK AT GREENWICH

Antnee was now nearing the end of his tale. It seemed to not just be the end but a new beginning. He said:

"Now Sir, a brief set of details on the Duchess, for indeed Sir, she returned to Greenwich."

He continued:

"Then, after a final catching of a boat at the river's edge, the Duchess of Pinus travelled on her own boat towards the mouth of the Thames, around the edge of the city, then beyond its bounds, around every curve and after a few hours of a slow ride they reached Greenwich. Whereupon she disembarked to return now as a full Duchess, a domain to manage, a true Royal, and knowing that Master Shakespeare was well upon his career and would continue well under the new King."

For now she would have to raise a family and uphold the honor placed upon her by the good Queen and

continued by the King. She had a duty and her family would have a continuing responsibility. They were now of a class that demanded much and she was certain that they would be up to this challenge.

I looked at Antnee, he was truly exhausted, for we had gone on at this for well over two hours, and I was amazed at how I now saw Shakespeare in so different a light.

I said to him:

"Antnee, that was the best tale yet my good friend. You are a brilliant and engaging teller of tales. You must rest now my friend. I will get some more sunflower seeds."

He turned and said:

"Thank you so much Sir, it is wonderful to have someone who appreciates true history. Oh, and by the way, bring out a few of those corn cobs, and perhaps an apple of two."

Ah, my Antnee, always eating. I then went to gather the food and reward my good friend.

And for a brief time, as Antnee had spoken the tale, I had been drawn back to the time of the Bard, to the smells and sounds, to the words and emotions, to the conflicts and friendships, and to the three players who, even in Antnee's mind, were so intertwined in their time and ours.