

## HOW THE BRIDGETOWN SAFARI CAME TO BE by Kip Pratt

It was the time of the great flood, long, long ago; long before the days of Brutus the King. The waters were finally abating after many moons of raging storms. The battered ark took shelter at last, in the mouth of a great river. A dove alighted on the mizzen boom. The ark lumbered up the river on the swelling tide, following the path by which the bird had returned. As the channel narrowed, so the leviathan ground to a halt in the shallows, her beam resting in the mud, her tattered sails hanging limp. The great poop deck tilted as she settled and the clinker work groaned from the travails of the long voyage. The Lady of the Ark gripped the sodden rail. The dove flew down and sat, cooing, on her shoulder. She took the ash branch gently from its beak, and then the bird flew off, alighting in the grasses of the long, low marsh.

‘So *this* is the place,’ she muttered. ‘Thanks be. Come. Let us alight!’

The starboard doors parted on their great iron hinges, the gangway slid from its housing and the disembarkation began. Zebra, giraffe, elephant, ape, tiger, koala, peacock, deer and more, many more, ran down the wooden boards in their crazed gaits, desperate to see the light after the nightmare of the lower decks in the dark, pitching madness. As they inhaled their new surroundings, so the lady scooped up her three most precious beasts... the toad, the long crippler and the snake... the triumvirate which had sustained her spirits through the journey over the eternal waves. She placed them in her iron crucible, slung it on her shoulder and followed, not through the starboard door, for she was sorely sick of life with the wild creatures, but by the port gangplank, onto the south-western shore, winding her way with bended back, up the slopes, through the forest, seeking a place to call home. She heard at last some sacred springs, below the edge where the sun rarely shone, babbling cold and fresh under a million fronds. She placed the crucible on the ground, released the toad, long crippler and snake, and rose to her full height, addressing the sky...

‘Here I stand, here I rest!’ she cried.

Her voice, though strong, was softened by the profusion of succulent plants. She knelt on the mosses by the waters, drew up a draft in her hands and drank it down with a shudder. The toad croaked. The snake shed the first of many skins. The long crippler slithered across the lady’s delicate slipper and disappeared under a flat stone.

‘Here you may stay, my darlings, my beautiful babies,’ she said, ‘safe from the crazy play of baboons, the flapping of giant wings, the clumsy hooves of muntjac and the jaws of the big cat. The voyage is over!’ She turned until she faced the sunlit hill across the valley and addressed those creatures stretching their sea legs on the marshes.

‘Be gone, creatures of the lower decks! You will not cross this river! Leave me now, with my babies!’

They hesitated, each testing the air in their own way, then they snuck up and away; away from the bilges, foul with rotting faeces. They began to graze and hunt; cawing, braying, roaring, hissing... imbibing the sights, sounds and smells of their new kingdom.

‘Be gone! Be gone!’

It had been an arduous journey with the lady at the helm, aided by her three slippery companions. Throughout the voyage the mistress had bestowed upon her babies a lavish favouritism ... the warmth of her silks, the reassurance of her delicate strokes. The wild creatures hated them with a vengeance for their lofty status, and they feared their mistress.

‘We are gone! We are gone!’ they answered back.

And so The Lady of the Ark, freed from the responsibility of the tiller and accompanied only by her triumvirate, was separated from the wild creatures by the swelling waters of the river, for there was no ford, even at low tide. It had been a long, long voyage.

So it was for millennia. The lady took her ladle and dug three wells, one for each of her babies to drink from. She built an iron gate and enclosed her kingdom with high walls. She grew a fine garden of magic herbs and took great care of her triumvirate, feeding them on the sour leeches which covered the lush banks. The triumvirate flourished, growing big and fat on their mistress's offerings. Meanwhile, the wild creatures of the ark scavenged on the uplands, on the far side of the river, rekindling their instincts for survival, fearful of the lady's magic, not daring to swim to the other side.

Then, one day, a captain came. The great flood had long since receded. He too had travelled far, away from tragedy, up the self-same river on the tide, with his entourage of weary, battle-hardened oarsmen. He sought a place to live, a place in which to forget. The descendants of the ark, unaware of his arrival, came down to the river, as always, to drink. The captain stood on the prow of his slender vessel, a fine albatross feather fluttering from his golden helmet. He drew a spear from its sheath, raised it above his head and paused. Then, in one swift movement, he hurled the spear, piercing the heart of a muntjac, bringing it down in a flurry of dust. The oarsmen, grown thin on ship's biscuits and the weevils therein, dragged the carcass to a roaring fire and feasted with relish on its haunches. Replete, they strummed on their lyres and banged on their drums, long into the night.

When the feasting and music was over, the captain stood before them. He removed his fine helmet and held it before his chest...

'Here I stand, here I rest. We will build a bridge to unite these lands, and here I will be knighted, Brutus, king of Albion. Let this bridge be called... Totnes!'

The Lady of the Ark, hearing the commotion, left her hideaway through the iron gates and slunk down to the river, keeping her head low beneath the ferns, her beloved triumvirate wet and wriggling in her pockets. Though the night was dark, she could see the hardened grins in the fire light, could smell the sweat of bodies, of cooking meat. She could hear their raucous belly laughs. She slunk back to her garden, fearful of these brutish men.

The next morning, disguised as a weasel, she returned to the riverbank, to spy, to glean, to understand. When she saw the stonemasons with their scaffolds, lump hammers, chisels, pulleys and casks of mortar, she was aghast.

A bridge?

No man, however fine his albatross feather, however dead his eye, would *dare* to build a bridge across to *her* kingdom from that of the wild creatures. Had she not banished those hungry predators and ridiculous baboons in order to protect her three babies? Had she not cast them asunder to the sunlit hill, after many years together on the high seas, cooped up in raucous, malodorous, madness? Had she not washed her hands of their beastly presence? How could he!

She raced back through the forest, tearing her skirts on the brambles, arriving in a lather at her wells. The iron crucible lay rusting in a cave. She dragged it out, drew the ladle from her belt and mixed a slow welkybrew of all things slippery; snails, slugs, tadpoles and leeches, boiled in the icy water of the three springs, seasoned with the acrid leaves of a thousand herbs. She was in a fervour, her mind lost to rage, and her three babies, toad, long crippler and snake, cowered under the fronds, afraid for their lives. Before dusk, the oozing,

pungent stew was ready. She scooped it up, gelatinous and steaming in her long fingers, daubing herself from head to foot. Then she sang her shrill song from hill to hill.

The stonemasons paused, their trowels raised, unsure of the meaning of this fiendish, wailing song. Then, one by one, they were brought to their knees. The Captain removed his helmet and bowed low in humble supplication. The wild creatures froze, motionless, sculpted in their acts of grazing, climbing, grooming, mating, cantering... The hill became quiet. No braying, no roaring. All was still, and the corpses shone in the sun.

So it was for millennia. And when the settlers came with their thatch, their wattle and daub, their beasts of burden, their seeds, their mead, their motte and bailey, their churches and inns, they were astonished. The frozen creatures greeted them with painted eyes, still bright in their plumages; leaping, climbing, captured for all eternity in their wild poses.

As for The Lady of the Ark; *she* laid low, deep in the catacombs below her wells, petting her loved ones, serving them the finest morsels, waiting for the moment to sing once more...