



THE WAGHALTER TALES

By Simon Howard

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ONE

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A stormy night of stormy thoughts. Freddie drew in his blanket tight.
With stomach wrenched he wrestled with sleep and longed for the morning light.
His heart thumped, his pulse jumped and his body was covered in sweat.
Freddie knew, 'til the day broke through, he was constantly under threat.

Clouds scudded and thunder thudded; the weather was foul, appalling.
But as fear took root, he heard a flute and sensed the past was calling.
Would the Hanging Boy come that night, a twisted rope about his throat?
Whenever he did the sallow kid just swung in a sackcloth coat.

The Hanging Boy just hung around; he dawdled and he dangled.
The tortured face of a tortured soul whose hopes had all been strangled.
Freddie was scared of the Hanging Boy with features pinched and gaunt.
He wished the wraith would leave him alone or pick someone else to haunt.

Six weeks ago the boy appeared and hovered over Freddie's bed.
Six times since Hanging Boy returned from the world of the living dead.
"What do you want?!! What DO you want?!!" Freddie pleaded and pressed.
The only reply, a mournful cry, from his uninvited guest.

Time stood still when Hanging Boy came; the moment, like him, suspended
and Freddie's nerves were frayed at the ends whenever the ghoul attended.
Yet, Freddie should not have been shocked that a spectre was hanging around.
He lived in a place that age had defaced, the sort where spirits abound.

The floorboards squeaked and the rafters creaked, all choked in creeping vine.
As old as the hills, the house sent chills that tingled up the spine.
Musty smells like cold, damp towels clung around the walls and floors
and timbers vast echoed the past with banging, rattling doors.

As dawn approached Freddie's fears awoke. Hanging Boy might pay him a call!
He thought of the body, all limp and shoddy. His skin began to crawl.
Freddie tossed and turned in his bed when the fragile calm of the night
was disturbed by a loud rumble which rapidly gathered might.

Tromping boots marched in time to the monotonous beat of a drum
whilst a haunting flute swirled above the increasingly moody thrum.
The melody hung in the air and Freddie felt helplessly drawn
to the strangely hypnotic pipes that infused the early morn.

The soulful lament of the flute was joined by a rising clamour
and a bell rang out as proud as an anvil under the hammer.
The tolling bell sounded its knell so loud it could wake up the dead.
Wishing no more of the ear-splitting roar, Freddie leapt out his bed.

He bravely threw back the curtains and he opened the windows wide.
A noisy blast had Freddie aghast; the scene left him stupefied.
He rubbed his eyes and pinched his skin and blinked in quick succession.
There below, in the ghostly glow, was an infantry in procession.

In military step they marched in uniforms strikingly smart.
Formed in ranks, along both flanks, of a lumbering wooden cart.
Alone in the cart stood a boy who was chained and drained of vigour;
sackcloth coat and a rope at his throat, Hanging Boy was that figure!

Heading this troop a man with a stoop was chiming the bell of doom.
He led the pack along the dirt track in an atmosphere of gloom.
"FREDDIE, COME DOWN," called a voice that was strong and resolute.
"PRAY DON'T DITHER, PLEASE COME HITHER," urged the piper of the flute.

The words pulled Freddie like a magnet and teleported him outside.
Magically drawn to the piper who swept him swiftly to his side.
Crisp autumn leaves crackled, the cart groaned as it trundled along.
Fifty soldiers fixed their sights toward a heaving throng.

The crowd was busy assembling in the shade of a castle gate.
Freddie glanced at the boy in the cart and instantly guessed his fate.
"Piper, don't let this happen!" Freddie begged for the doomed boy's plight.
"Be silent for a while, younghede. We shall talk when the time is right."

Spiteful grey clouds rolled into view. Drizzle turned into a shower.
Freddie's poor heart jumped in his mouth when he saw the scaffold tower.
The drums boomed as the castle loomed and the crowd began to nudge
for a better peek, to watch the boy speak, before the Hanging Judge.

"You're accused of stealing rolls of bread," Hanging Judge spat out the charge.
"A few, my lord, with good reason, but none of them were very large."
"There is no excuse for thieving." The rabble drew in its breath.
"No Corsned for thou, Wagabund, so I sentence thee to death!"

"My Lord, I ask for thy forgiveness" said the boy plain and contrite.
"We were robbed by a fierce villain who then vanished into the night.
He stole a priceless chess set that my fader had carved to sell.
Instead, we are now penniless, and our fader's most unwell."

"Enough, enough," barked The Hanging Judge. "Two wrongs don't make a right!
You will swing from the gallows today, boy, and swing from a very great height!"
"My brothers and sisters were starving," said the boy with his head held high.
"So if it's a sin to protect my kin, for that I'm prepared to die.

But heed me now, and mark my words, though my life be taken away.
This body's gone but my soul lives on; *I vow to return one day.*"
With the noose still circling his neck, the rope was thrown over the beam.
He was pushed from the cart, with a start, and swung in a silent scream.

The rope around his throat tightened as the horde continued to bray.
Giddily spinning and twisting 'til he slowed to a deathly sway.
Tears were streaming down Freddie's cheeks as the boy's awful end drew nigh.
The bell clanged, the boy was hanged, and a raven croaked in the sky.

Then, all of a sudden, a blinding flash, two forks of lightning bright,
which struck the gallows once, then twice, and set the gibbet alight.
A furious gale arrived behind, whipping up a whirlwind fierce
that fanned the flames around the boy as the heavens spilt their tears.

The gallows sizzled in the pouring rain, splintered and scorched and wet.
This ghastly fire, a funeral pyre, that nobody would forget.
"How could they do it?" wept Freddie. "The punishment is so unjust!"
"Food was scarce," the piper replied, "folks swung for pinching a crust."

"To hang him for feeding his family is cruel and much too stern!"
"Freddie, it is time for us to talk. There is much thou has to learn.
My name, younghede, is Cosmo. We must tarry awhile by the moat."
In cross-legged stance, he entered a trance, slid the flute from his coat.

He played a song of great beauty, then the flute he carefully stowed
and he gazed at the deep blue water as a story from his lips flowed.
Freddie sat there spellbound. He was unable to move or speak,
while the tale unravelled before him, as dawn began to peek...

Hope you enjoyed The Waghalter Tales, Part 1, Chapter 1

I will be uploading more chapters and glossary during #lockdown

Thanks for reading and please retweet if you like☺

Simon

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