

The Royals of Hegn
by Ursula K. Le Guin

Hegn is a small country, an island monarchy blessed with a marvelous climate and a vegetation so rich that lunch or dinner there consists of reaching up to a tree to pluck a succulent, sunwarmed, ripe, rare steakfruit, or sitting down under a llumbush and letting the buttery morsels drop onto one's lap or straight into one mouth. And then for dessert there are the sorbice blossoms, tart, sweet, and crunchy.

Four or five centuries ago the Hegnish were evidently an enterprising, stirring lot, who built good roads, fine cities, noble country houses and palaces, all surrounded by literally delicious gardens. Then they entered a settling-down phase, and at present they simply live in their beautiful houses. They have hobbies, pursued with tranquil obsession. Some take up the cultivation and breeding of ever finer varieties of grapes. (The Hegnian grape is self-fermenting; a small cluster of them has the taste, scent, and effect of a split of Veuve Clicquot. Left longer on the vine, the grapes reach 80 or 90 proof, and the taste comes to resemble a good single malt whiskey.) Some raise pet gorkis, an amiable, short-legged domestic animal; others embroider pretty hangings for the churches; many take their pleasure in sports. They all enjoy social gatherings.

People dress nicely for these parties. They eat some grapes, dance a little, and talk. Conversation is desultory and, some would say, vapid. It concerns the kind and quality of the grapes, discussed with much technicality; the weather, which is usually settled fair, but can always be threatening, or have threatened, to rain; and sports, particularly the characteristically Hegnish game of sutpot, which requires a playing field of several acres and involves two teams, many rules, a large ball, several small holes in the ground, a movable fence, a short, flat bat, two vaulting poles, four umpires, and several days. No non-Hegnish person has ever been able to understand it. Hegnishmen discuss the last match played with the same grave deliberation and relentless attention to detail with which they played it. Other subjects of conversation are the behavior of pet gorkis and the decoration of the local church. Religion and politics are never discussed. It may be that they do not exist, having been reduced to a succession of purely formal events and observances, while their place is filled by the central element, the focus and foundation of Hegnish society, which is best described as the Degree of Consanguinity.

It is a small island, and nearly everybody is related. As it is a monarchy, or rather a congeries of monarchies, this means that almost everybody is related to a monarch or is a member of the Royal Family.

In earlier times this universality of aristocracy caused trouble and dissension. Rival claimants to the crown tried to eliminate each other; there was a long period of violence referred to as the Purification of the Peerage, a war called the Agnate War, and the brief, bloody Cross-Cousins Revolt. But all these family quarrels were settled when the genealogies of every lineage and individual were established and recorded in the great work of

<I>Book of the Blood.</I></P>

four hundred and eighty-eight years old, the
centerpiece of every Hegnish household.

ever reads. Most people know

family by heart. Publication

the reign of Eduber XII of Sparg, the

<P>Now
this book is, I may
say without exaggeration, the

Indeed it is the only book anybody

the sections dealing with their own

Supplements to the Book of the Blood

discuss the sad extinction

of old Prince Levigvig, the

Swads arising from the

IV and the Duchess of Mabuber,

Lagn to the crown of East

great-uncle, his uncle,

or the re-legitimization

Royal) of the great-grandson

are eight hundred and seventeen kings in

at least parts of palaces;

region isn't what makes a king

crown and wearing it on certain

another king, and having

unquestionably in the Book of the Blood, and edging the sod at the first game of the local sutpot season,

Blessing of the Fish, and knowing

one's eldest son is the crown

prince royal and one's sister

one's relations and all their children

maintain an aristocracy it is necessary that persons of exalted

with others of their kind.

Just as the bloodline of

be tracked straight back

family of Hegn can trace

Glander, who ruled eight

care, but their owners do, and

of the annual Addition and is awaited as the great event of

of conversation for months, as people

of the Levigian House with the death

exciting possibility of an heir to the

eminently suitable marriage of Endol

the unexpected succession of Viscount

Fob due to the untimely deaths of his

and his cousin all in the same year,

(by decree of the Board of Editors-

of the Bastard of Eg Morg.)

There

title to certain lands, or palaces, or

but actual rule or dominion over a

a king. What matters is having the

occasions, such as the coronation of

one's lineage recorded

and being present at the annual

that one's wife is the queen and

prince and one's brother is the

is the princess royal and all

are of the blood royal.

To

rank form intimate association only

Fortunately there are plenty of those.

a Thoroughbred horse on my planet can

to the Godolphin Arabian, every royal

its ancestry back to Rugland of Hegn-

centuries ago. The horses don't

families. In this sense, Hegn may
farm.</P>

is an unspoken consensus that certain royal houses are slightly,
because they descend directly
than one of his eight younger
have married into the central
unshakable connection. Each
incomparable claim to distinction,
the semi-legendary conqueror
or a family tree never sullied
duchess but exhibiting (on the
Blood </I>in the palace library) a continuous and unadulterated flowering
</P>

when the novelty of the annual <I>Addition and Supplements </I>at last wears
thin, the royal guests at the royal parties can
of consanguinity, settling
of Agnin IV’s second marriage,
same prince who was slain
father’s palace against the
could not, have been the
King of Shut.</P>

questions are not of interest to everyone, and the placid
pursue them bores or offends
that the Hegnish have absolutely
themselves can also cause offense,
is all the Hegnish know about
are too polite to say that
but if they had to think about

so do the kings and the royal
be seen as a vast stud

<P>There
as it were, more royal than others,
from Rugland’s eldest son rather
sons; but all the other royal houses
line often enough to establish an
house also has some unique,
such as descent from Alfign the Ax,
of North Hegn, or a collateral saint,
by marriage with a mere duke or
ever-open page of the <I>Book of the
of true blue princes and processes.

<P>And so,
always fall back on discussing degrees
such questions as whether the son born
to Tivand of Shut, was or was not the
at the age of thirteen defending his
Anti-Agnates and therefore could, or
father of the Duke of Vigrign, later

<P>Such
fanaticism with which the Hegnish
many visitors to the island. The fact
no interest in any people except
or even rage. Foreigners exist. That
them, and all they care to know. They
it is a pity that foreigners exist,
it, they would think so. </P>

not, however, have to think about foreigners. That is taken care of for them. The Interplanary Hotel on Hegn is in Hemgogn, a beautiful little kingdom on the west coast. The Interplanary Agency runs the hotel and hires local guides. The guides, mostly dukes and earls, take visitors to see the Alternation of the Watch on the Walls, performed by princes of the blood, wearing magnificent traditional regalia, at noon and six daily. The Agency also offers day tours to a couple of other kingdoms. The bus runs softly along the ancient, indestructible roads among sunlit orchards and wildfood forests. The tourists get out of the bus and look at the ruins, or walk through the parts of the palace open to visitors. The inhabitants of the palace are aloof but unfailingly civil and courteous, as befits royalty. Perhaps the Queen comes down and smiles at the tourists without actually looking at them and instructs the pretty little Crown Princess to invite them to pick and eat whatever they like in the lunch-orchard, and then she and the Princess go back into the private part of the palace, and the tourists have lunch and get back into the bus. And that is that.

an introvert, I rather like Hegn. One does not have to mingle, good, and the sunlight sweet. I went there more than once, and stayed longer than most people do, and so it happened that I learned about the Hegnish Commoners.

walking down the main street of Legners Royal, the capital square in front of the old Church of the Thrice Royal Martyr. I thought it must be one of the many annual festivals or rituals and joined the crowd to watch. These events are always slow, decorous, and profoundly dull. But they're the only events there are: and they have their own tedious

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the ancient, indestructible roads
forests. The tourists get out of the
or walk through the parts of the
inhabitants of the palace are aloof
courteous, as befits royalty. Perhaps
smiles at the tourists without
the pretty little Crown Princess to
whatever they like in the lunch-
Princess go back into the private part
tourists have lunch and get back into
<P>Being
since one can't. And the food is
I went there more than once, and
do, and so it happened that I learned
<P>I was
Royal, the capital
of Hemgogn, when I saw a crowd in the
Church of the Thrice Royal Martyr. I
the many annual festivals or rituals
These events are always slow,
they're the only events there

funeral. And it was altogether
had ever witnessed, above
people.

were all royals, of course, like any crowd
princesses, duchesses, countesses,
the regal reserve, the sovereign
always seen in them before.
square, for once not engaged in
traditional occupation or
if for comfort. They were
and verged upon being noisy.
grieving, openly grieving.

person nearest me in the crowd was the
aunt by marriage. I knew who she
morning at half past eight,
walk the King's pet gorki
the hotel, and one of the
I had watched from the
hotel while the gorki, a fine,
himself under the cheeseblossom
away into a tranquil vacancy
aristocrats.

those pale eyes were filled with tears,
with the effort to control

"Your ladyship," I said, hoping that the translatomat would
provide
in case I had it wrong, "forgive
funeral is this?"

charm. Soon, however, I saw this was a
different from any Hegnish ceremony I
all in the behavior of the

They
them princes, dukes, earls,
etc. But they were not behaving with
aplomb, the majestic apathy I had
They were standing about in the
any kind of prescribed ritual duty or
hobby, but just crowding together. as
disturbed, distressed, disorganized,
They showed emotion. They were

The
Mogn and Farstis, the Queen's
was because I had seen her, every
issue forth from the Royal Palace to
in the Palace gardens, which border on
Agency guides had told me who she was.
window of the breakfast room of the
heavily testicled specimen, relieved
bushes, and the Dowager Duchess gazed
reserved for the eyes of true

But now
and the soft,
weathered face of the Duchess worked
her feelings.

"
the proper appellation for a duchess
me, I am from another country, whose

looked at me unseeing, dimly surprised but too absorbed in
effrontery. "Sissie's,"
her break into open sobs
her face in her large lace
more.

crowd was growing rapidly, constantly. By the time the coffin
must have been over a thousand
Legners, all of them members
square. The King and his
coffin at a respectful distance.

coffin was carried and closely surrounded by people I had
lot;pale, fat men in cheap suits,
brassy hair and stiletto heels,
thick thighs in a miniskirt,
mantilla. She staggered
half-hysterical, supported
with a pencil mustache and
small, dry, tired, dogged woman
rusty black.

far edge of the crowd I saw a native guide with whom I
friendship, a young viscount, son
way toward him. It took quite
along with the slow procession
entourage toward the King's limousines
near the Palace gates. When

"Who is it? Who are they?"

"Sissie," he said almost in a wail, caught up in the general
grief;"Sissie

back to his duties as guide and

<P>She
sorrow to wonder at my ignorance or my
she said, and speaking the name made
for a moment. She turned away, hiding
handkerchief, and I dared ask no

<P>The
was borne forth from the church, there
people, most of the population of
of the Royal Family, crowded into the
two sons and his brother followed the

<P>The
never seen before, a very odd
pimpley boys, middle-aged women with
and a highly visible young woman with
a halter top, and a black cotton lace
along after the coffin weeping aloud,
on one side by a scared-looking man
two-tone shoes, on the other by a
in her seventies dressed entirely in

<P>At the
had struck up a lightweight
of the Duke of Ist, and I worked my
a while, as everyone was streaming
of the coffin-bearers and their
and horse-drawn coaches that waited

I finally got to the guide I said,

<P><FONT FACE="Arial"

died last night!" Then, coming

pleasant aristocratic manner,
tears, and said, "They're our
"And Sissie's?"
"She's, she was, their daughter. The only daughter. Do
what he
eyes. "She was such a dear
always. Such a sweet smile. And
She was the only one. Oh, she
Sissie!" And he broke right

interpreter and trying to regain his
he looked at me, blinked back his
commoners."
"And Sissie's?"
"She's, she was, their daughter. The only daughter. Do
what he
could, the tears would well into his
girl. Such a help to her mother,
there's nobody like her, nobody.
was so full of love. Our poor little
down and cried aloud.

down and cried aloud.
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