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# Clyffe Notes



Barony of Dun Carraig

# If I were king...

Cadfan ap Morgan

Inside This Issue:	
Feature .....	1-5
Business Mtg Minutes.....	5
Officer Reports.....	5-7
Chronicler's Choice.....	7
Calendar.....	8
Baronial Progress.....	8
Regnum.....	9

“Ah, if I were king...”

You know that line. You know the voice behind it: a light, breathy English baritone that suggests a poet, but a poet with a wrist of steel. It’s been parodied almost to death, used as the voice of cereal pitchman Toucan Sam and cartoon characters like Odie Cologne from the old “King Leo and his Short Subjects” (which is where I first encountered it). For all that it’s still the voice we think of when we think: *Swashbuckler*.

Did you know it’s the voice of a movie star who was once as big as Errol Flynn? Did you know it’s from a movie that came out in direct competition with Flynn’s *The Adventures of Robin Hood*?

That movie was the story of a college-educated white kid who became a gangsta rapper—in medieval Paris. That same story inspired a hit Broadway musical as big as *Cats*, a meme as viral as “All Your Base,” a silent film that led to an iconic fantasy series, and that line of poetry which sounds like one of the gangsta rapper’s poems. But it isn’t.

It’s from fan-fiction.



Maybe you’ve heard somebody say—like, in reference to FORTRAN or Betamax—“But where are the snows of yester-year?” Congratulations: you know at least one line of medieval poetry. It’s from François Villon’s *Ballade of Bygone Ladies*. Originally “*Mais où sont les neiges d’antan*,” it was translated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a pop-star poet of 19<sup>th</sup>-century England (like all pop stars he had a genius for the lyric hook).

Villon himself had a right to sing the blues. Unlike Messrs. Mathers, Van Winkle and Zimmerman [Eminem, Vanilla Ice, Bob Dylan] he actually *was* born into a world of poverty and strife. In 1431 the King of France was at war with the Duke of Burgundy (*q.v.*<sup>1</sup>), which war, combined with a series of awful winters, had so blighted Paris that wolves could come into the city and attack people in broad daylight.

1 *Quo vadis*—Latin for “remember this, it’s important later.”

Villon's mother was single. A kind uncle provided for them both, and the boy showed such promise that he eventually got into the University of Paris, then the greatest center of learning in Europe. He graduated in 1449.

But then he went off the rails. He started hanging out with the thieves and whores of Paris, entertaining them with verse that married higher education and literature to criminal slang and dirty jokes. Of course it was an instant hit. Villon's poems were among the first things published when the printing press reached France later that century, and they haven't been out of print since. Villon never saw a penny, being dead by then. Anyway he preferred to make his living by pimping, begging and seeking patronage, with the odd burglary thrown in. After several close brushes with the gallows he mysteriously disappeared in 1463, never to be heard from again.

This is what Hollywood calls "surefire material."

In fact it was so surefire people didn't even wait for Hollywood to be invented. In 1901 Justin Huntly McCarthy wrote a historical novel, a romanticized account of Villon's life. That novel became a play, and that play became a musical, and that musical ran for over five hundred shows on Broadway and toured in England. It was famous for its rousing second-act closer, "Song of the Vagabonds:"

*Sons of toil and danger,  
Will you serve a stranger  
And bow down to Burgundy?  
Sons of shame and sorrow,  
Will you cheer tomorrow  
For the crown of Burgundy?  
Onward! Onward! Swords against the Foe  
Forward! Forward the lily banners go!  
Sons of France around us,  
Break the chain that bound us,  
And to Hell with Burgundy!*

That refrain—"To Hell with Burgundy!"-- became a pop-culture catchphrase of the 1920s, transmitted in mainly by radio, the newfangled World Wide Web of its day.

By this time Hollywood was up and running. They first filmed Huntly's novel in 1920, as a silent, in which the role of King Louis the XI was played by one Fritz Lieber. Recognize the name? No, it wasn't the author of the "Fafhrd and Grey Mouser" series. This was his *father*, the noted Shakespearean. Lieber *père* was chosen to play Louis not only for his experience with villains like Richard III but also for being uncommonly long-limbed: Louis was called "the Spider King" for that reason (among others).

(Ever read Lieber *filis'* novel *Swords of Lankhmar*? Note the character of Glipkerio Kistomercus, autocrat of the city: unnaturally tall, gangly, antic—like Louis. For that matter, note how the Grey Mouser is himself like Villon: slight and swarthy, an urban footpad, not an outdoorsy outlaw like Robin Hood. This is *not* coincidence. )

And the name of Huntly's novel, and of the play it inspired, and the movie *that* inspired?

*If I Were King*

Then In 1938 Warner Brothers was set to roll out its summer blockbuster, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. It had swashbuckling adventure, plus Olivia deHavilland for the leading lady, Basil Rathbone as the heavy, and Errol Flynn, star of the smash hit *Captain Blood*, as the male lead. *And* it was a remake of the 1922 silent version, with Douglas Fairbanks, which had been a smash hit. <sup>2</sup> Who could compete with that?

Answer: Paramount. Having got wind of Warner's plans they decided to remake the 1920 silent version of *If I Were King*. So *it* also had swashbuckling adventure, plus Francis Dee for the leading lady, and... Basil Rathbone as the heavy. *And their* male lead was the thinking man's action hero: Ronald Colman, star of *The Prisoner of Zenda* and *A Tale of Two Cities*.

(Here's an experiment: pretend you're an actor and that you're reciting the "It is a far, far better thing I do..." speech. Say it out loud. Notice the accent and intonation you're using? It's the same one you hear when you think of "Ah, if I were king..." That's Ronald Colman.)

But Paramount's secret weapon was their script: it was by Preston Sturges, who had scripted *The Invisible Man* (yes, yes, WHICH YOU PROBABLY HAVEN'T SEEN HAR HAR) as well as getting an unheard-of sum for being the sole writer on the hit *The Power and the Glory*. <sup>3</sup>He was famous for turning out work that was witty and literate yet widely popular as well, and his script would incorporate whole chunks of Villon's poetry—most of it in Rossetti's translation. This was what big-budget popcorn flicks were like in 1938.

There was one key scene that turned on an extended passage of verse: Villon, dragged unwillingly to Mass by his uncle, observes the noble maiden Katherine de Vaucelles in church as well. Smitten with love, he surreptitiously writes a poem while his uncle prays. Outside he pleads with her to stop and listen:

*If I were king---ah love, if I were king!  
What tributary nations would I bring  
To stoop before your sceptre and to swear  
Allegiance to your lips and eyes and hair.  
Beneath your feet what treasures I would fling:  
The stars should be your pearls upon a string,  
The world a ruby for your finger ring,  
And you should have the sun and moon to wear  
If I were king.*

*Let these wild dreams and wilder words take wing,  
Deep in the woods I hear a shepherd sing  
A simple ballad to a sylvan air,  
Of love that ever finds your face more fair.  
I could not give you any godlier thing  
If I were king.*

---

<sup>2</sup> Hollywood's fondness for remakes is as old as Hollywood. Then again, "sequelitis" has been around for over four hundred years (c.f Marlowe, Phillip: *Tamerlane*, *Tamerlane II*).

<sup>3</sup> Also, his mother had an affair with Alistair Crowley. You can't make this stuff up.

That sounds like it should be one of Villon's poems (it is, in fact, an excruciatingly correct *rondeau cinquain*, a verse-form common in 15<sup>th</sup>-century France) Or at least one of Rossetti's. But it's not. It's from Huntley's 1901 novel and he wrote it for the character of Villon, as something Villon might very well have said.

In other words, it's a fanfic. Or a *pastiche* as they called it then.

So who won the battle of the blockbusters that year?

Well, *If I Were King* had Ronald Coleman reciting poetry in authentic period style. *Robin Hood* had Errol Flynn swinging on vines in Technicolor.

Yeah, it wasn't even close.

It might have been a more interesting contest if Paramount had gotten the movie done in time to go head-to-head with Warner Brothers that summer. As it was *Robin Hood* premiered in May, while *If I Were King* came out in November. But Paramount didn't do badly: the film received four Oscar nominations and did plenty to advance the careers of everyone who worked on it—including Edith Head, the costume designer, who eventually won more Oscars than any other woman (and served as the model for Edna Mode in *The Incredibles*)

Sturges went on to win the first-ever Oscar for Best Original Screenplay in 1940, for *The Great McGinty*, and was for a while the third-highest-paid man in America. One of the things he always demanded of the studios he worked for, was his right use the character actors and bit-part players of his early movies whenever possible. They had been with him on the way up and he wanted to make sure they were not forgotten.

And Colman? He was nominated for four Oscars, finally winning one in 1947 for his star turn in *A Double Life* (which also won him a Golden Globe). He went on to do all sorts of work, turning to radio when he grew too old to portray the swashbuckler (did you know he once starred in a radio adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft's *The Dunwich Horror*?)

One of his last gigs was *The Halls of Ivy*, a show that ran on CBS radio 1950-52 and on TV 1954-55. In it Colman played the president of a small Midwestern liberal arts college who spent every episode dealing with the various eccentrics, Bohemians and local yokels of his little community.

(...huh. "Community"—you know, if you wanted to remake *The Halls of Ivy* nowadays you'd probably want to set it at a community college. Somebody should really look into that...)

The story of *If I Were King* was restaged for radio several times in the 1940's, once with Colman reprising his role, and the musical version, *The Vagabond King*, got a movie remake in 1953. It's still revived for the stage from time to time. I saw one such production in the 1990's which featured an old friend (the Baroness Seleone in fact) as Katherine de Vaucelles. Sadly, the fellow cast opposite her as Villon sounded exactly like Dudley Do-Right.

But the figure of François Villon has largely faded from popular imagination, even while that of Robin Hood has been perennially renewed. The English-speaking world seems to prefer its outlaws muscular and woodsy. However young people today are increasingly urban, and celebrate urban antiheroes in their art and

entertainment. So it may yet be time to revisit the story, once so well-known, that left one lasting echo in our language: *If I were king...*

For the snows of yester-year do, after all, come 'round again.

Additional info at Wikipedia:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran%C3%A7ois\\_Villon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran%C3%A7ois_Villon)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preston\\_Sturges](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preston_Sturges)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/If\\_I\\_Were\\_King](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/If_I_Were_King)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rondeau\\_\(forme\\_fixe\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rondeau_(forme_fixe))

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronald\\_Colman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronald_Colman)



## December Business Meeting Minutes

December 1, 2015

In attendance: Adriana, Karl, Sandy, Amalia, Harald, Ceridwen, Coblath, Sam, Serena, Cadfan, Christopher, Ragnarr, Richard, Mary, Sam

### **Old Business**

Need bids for baronial events. We could bid for University if anybody wants to autocrat it.

### **New business**

CSM Renaissance Fair demo April 23-24.

Business Meetings are held on the first Tuesday of each month, 7:00pm at Big Larry's Comic Book Cafe, Leonardtown, MD 20650. For directions go to [duncarraig.net/directions.shtml](http://duncarraig.net/directions.shtml)



## Officer Reports

### B & B's Report

No event.

## Seneschal's Report

Waivers are in from birthday. Unevent coming up, is going.

## Chronicler's Report

Thanks to Thea, Cadfan, & Harald for info on honors & champions last month.

Vote on cover art (samples circulated at meeting).

Would like article ideas.

## Herald's Report

No report.

## Chatelaine's Report

New person (Sam) here - interests include siege, archery, A&S, calligraphy. Also made 2 other contacts. Chatelaine101 course completed.

Upcoming classes: beginning mead 12/13

Medieval dance 12/20

CSM Renaissance festival will be April 23-24 (which conflicts with Night on the Town).

## Quartermaster's Report

Nothing to report.

## Minister of Arts & Sciences Report

*(something about a January project date with info on Facebook, & something about 12th night & something about Kingdom A&S in spring, I can't make out my notes, sorry)*

Discussed A&S database with info for networking, eg people with interests, laurels. Discussed expanding the scope to kingdom-wide, including interests in service as well. Pictures of people's work would be good. Discussed scope, organization.

## Minister of Minor's Report *(via word of mouth)*

*(something about the castle- sorry, bad notes again)*

## Minister of the Lists' Report

Ragnarr won both tourneys at Birthday.

## Knight Marshal's Report

Practices happening. HEMA is both martial, and A&S.

## Chirurgeon's Report

No report.

## Webminister's Report *(via email)*

Set up Coblath to be able to update calendar & announcements. Can do that for other officers.  
Submitted report, requested copy of warrant.

## Exchequer's Report

\$7038.69 in account. \$688.83 outstanding (checks have not cleared yet for site check, nonmember surcharges, archery foam). Once checks clear, account will have \$6348.86.  
Term is up in August - is anybody interested in the position?

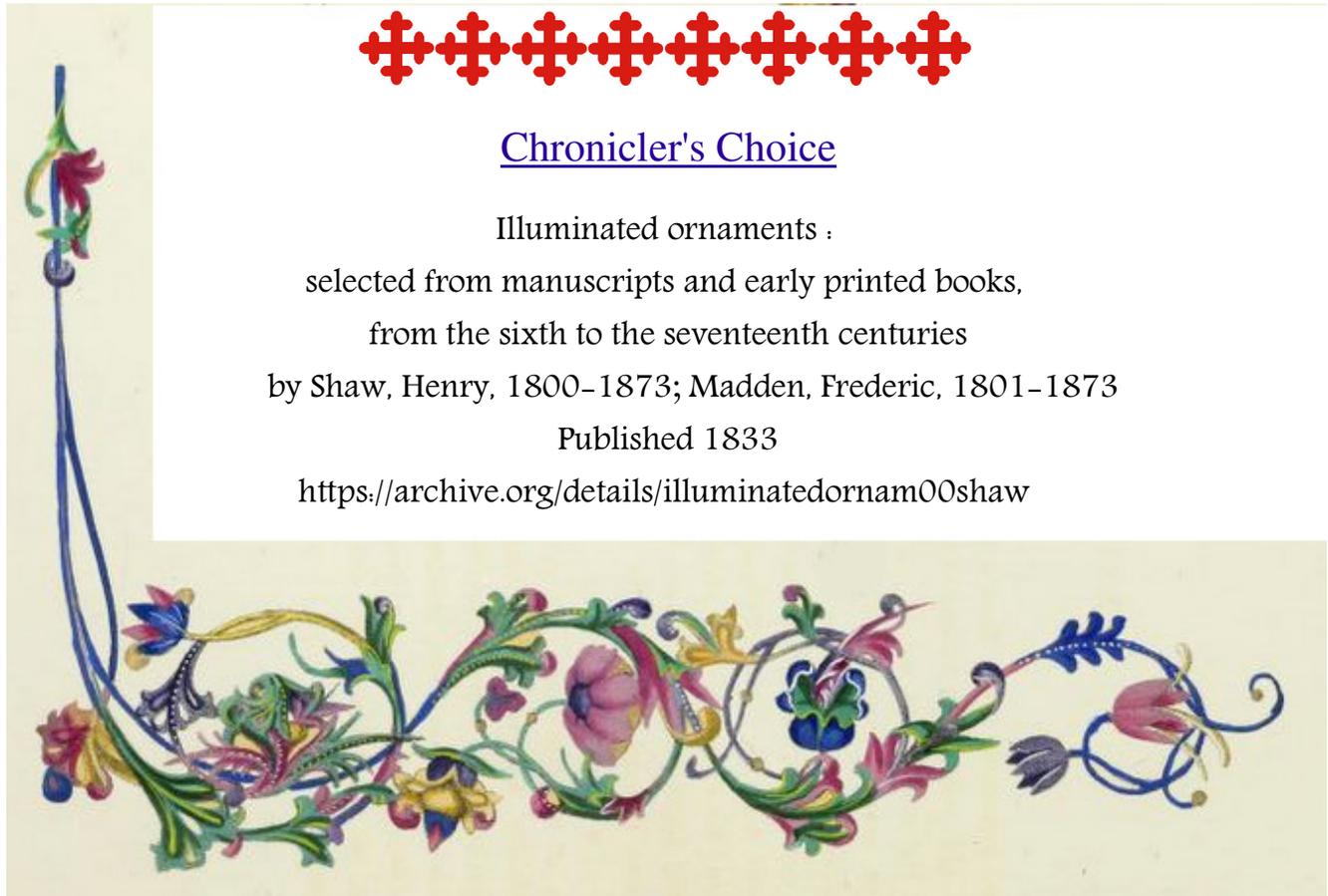


### Chronicler's Choice

Illuminated ornaments :  
selected from manuscripts and early printed books,  
from the sixth to the seventeenth centuries  
by Shaw, Henry, 1800-1873; Madden, Frederic, 1801-1873

Published 1833

<https://archive.org/details/illuminatedornam00shaw>



*Ornament from the Decretals of Pope Boniface VIII, 1465*

# JANUARY 2016

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					<b>1</b> New Year's Day  No Archery	<b>2</b> InterBaronial 12 <sup>th</sup> Night Tir-y-Don Hampton, VA
<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b> Baronial Business Meeting 7:00 PM Big Larry's <u>Leonardtown</u> HEMA Fight Study	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b> Archery Practice 7:00 PM Baron Jonathas' <u>house</u> Atlantian 12 <sup>th</sup> Night	<b>9</b> Atlantian 12th Night Nottingham Coill Pickens, SC (BnB)
<b>10</b> Atlantian 12th Night Nottingham Coill Pickens, SC (BnB)	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b> HEMA Fight Study 7:30 PM Southern CC	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b> Archery Practice 7:00 PM Baron Jonathas' house	<b>16</b> Feast of Fools Roxbury Mill Silver Spring, MD
<b>17</b>	<b>18</b> ML King Day	<b>19</b> HEMA Fight Study 7:30 PM Southern CC	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>22</b> Archery Practice 7:00 PM Baron Jonathas' house	<b>23</b> Torquemada's Trans-Iberian Winter Tour Lochmere Severna Park, MD
<b>24</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>26</b> HEMA Fight Study 7:30 PM Southern CC	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>29</b> Archery Practice 7:00 PM Baron Jonathas' house	<b>30</b> Lion's Head Tavern Greenlion Bay Chestertown, MD
<b>31</b>						

**Baronial Progress**

Key:

(BnB) – Baron Ragnarr and Baroness Lynette

(B) – Baron Ragnarr

(Ba) – Baroness Lynette

The Baronial Calendar displays events at nearby locations.

It is not a schedule of all Atlantian events.

For all scheduled events go to

www "dot" acorn "dot" atlantia "dot" sca "dot" org "slash" calendar "dot" php

If you would like to receive Clyffe Notes in printed form, please email me at [chronicler@uncarraig.net](mailto:chronicler@uncarraig.net). Please send your SCA and modern name(s) and your address.

Does something need correcting? Please let me know. Email me at [Chronicler@uncarraig.net](mailto:Chronicler@uncarraig.net) and I'll correct it in the next newsletter.

## Baronial Regnum



### Baron and Baroness

Ragnarr Blackhammer and  
Lynette Semere  
c/o Charles Kane and Jynette Mead  
22250 Chancellors Run Road  
Great Mills, MD 20634  
(540) 847-9282  
[BnB@DunCarraig.net](mailto:BnB@DunCarraig.net)



### Seneschal

Lady Adriana Michaels  
c/o Kelly Keck  
17826 Piney Point Road  
Tall Timbers, MD 20690  
(301) 576-0561  
(NLT 9 PM, NET 9 AM on weekends)  
[Seneschal@DunCarraig.net](mailto:Seneschal@DunCarraig.net)

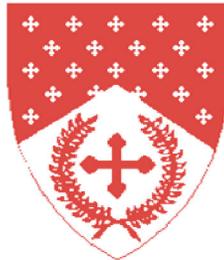
### Chancellor of the Exchequer

Karl Philipp von Königsberg  
c/o Charles Sprouse  
21 Chinaberry Ln.  
Indian Head, MD 20640  
(310) 743-3294  
[Exchequer@DunCarraig.net](mailto:Exchequer@DunCarraig.net)

**Mistress of Minors**  
Caitriona Bheachadoir  
[MoM@DunCarraig.net](mailto:MoM@DunCarraig.net)

### Chronicler

Mary Poschet  
c/o Mary Mosher  
9825 Tayloes Neck Road  
Nanjemoy, MD 20662  
(301) 246-4143  
[Chronicler@DunCarraig.net](mailto:Chronicler@DunCarraig.net)



**Knight Marshal**  
Sir Harald Brandarm  
c/o John McLaughlin  
[KnightMarshal@DunCarraig.net](mailto:KnightMarshal@DunCarraig.net)

### Herald

Cristobal Espada de Avalos  
[Herald@DunCarraig.net](mailto:Herald@DunCarraig.net)

### Minister of Arts & Sciences

Amalia Kunne  
[MOAS@DunCarraig.net](mailto:MOAS@DunCarraig.net)

**Mistress of the Lists**  
Baroness Lore Bubeck  
[MOL@duncarraig.net](mailto:MOL@duncarraig.net)

### Historian

Vacant

### Quartermaster

Lord Matthew of Summerdale  
c/o Matthew Keck  
17826 Piney Point Road  
Tall Timbers, MD 20690  
(301) 576-0561  
(NLT 9PM, NET 9AM on weekends)  
[Quartermaster@DunCarraig.net](mailto:Quartermaster@DunCarraig.net)

### Webminister

Lord Matthew of Summerdale  
c/o Matthew Keck  
17826 Piney Point Road  
Tall Timbers, MD 20690  
(301) 576-0561  
(NLT 9PM, NET 9AM on weekends)  
[webminister@DunCarraig.net](mailto:webminister@DunCarraig.net)

### Chatelaine

Lady Coblaith of Dal Riata  
c/o Elizabeth Redding  
4600 Innsbruck Court  
La Plata, MD 20646  
text at 301.751.9101  
[Chatelaine@DunCarraig.net](mailto:Chatelaine@DunCarraig.net)

### Baronial Champions

Armor: Torfin de Carric  
Rapier: Cristobal Espada de Avalos  
Archery: Nathan  
Arts & Sciences: Thea de Nes  
Bardic: Mary Poschet

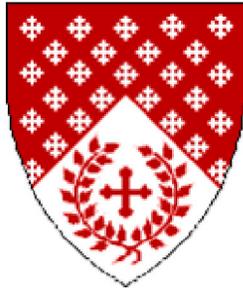
### Baronial Marshalate

Archery, Siege Weapons:  
Baron Jonathas Reinisch  
Rapier: Cristobal Espada de Avalos  
Thrown Weapons: Caitriona Bheachadoir

## Barony of Dun Carraig

Mary Poschet  
c/o Mary Mosher  
9825 Tayloes Neck Road  
Nanjemoy, MD 20662

E-mail: [Chronicler@duncarraig.net](mailto:Chronicler@duncarraig.net)



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<http://manuscripts.kb.nl/show/manuscript/10+F+33>

Page 1: Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:If-I-Were-King-poster-1938.jpg>

Page 7: from "Illuminated ornaments: selected from manuscripts and early printed books, from the sixth to the seventeenth centuries." Published 1833.  
<https://archive.org/details/illuminatedornam00shaw>