

Attraction and the Forge of God

by Steve Finan

The girl with the waist-length hair was far prettier close up than she'd looked from the scourging frame. I'd seen her looking at me, but had been unsure if she approved or disapproved of the way they'd branded the 'F' on top of each of my tattoos. It didn't pay to show feelings in the NewK.

I was released. The brands hurt like fuck. Don't swear, swearing in public earns you, if caught, six lashes from a Forge cane.

I made my way through the crowd forced to stop to watch the brandings, to where she was. Everyone was silent, except the poor bastard, err, fellow I mean, whose turn it was in the frame. He had a lot of tats and was suffering badly. Wailing and shrieking. The two brands I'd been given on my upper arms were bad, but apart from grunts of pain I hadn't whined like that bloke. I smiled at the girl with the hair, she looked through me. I think fornication outside of marriage is punishable by a caning on the back of the legs. I lose count of everything that is a caning offence and there is no Internet to check and no mobile phones to consult with your mates. But it's the pubs and the laughs and the football I miss most since this Forge lot took over.

I blooming well (see, I'm learning) hate the NewK and don't really know how the Forge people came to be in control. I pay no attention to politics, never did. It's boring. But we had an Election and everyone must have voted for the Forge because next thing I knew there was only God on TV, the mobile phone masts were torn down, Internet Service Providers were shut and these Forge people in their white boiler suits were all over the place, hitting people with canes and enforcing new laws I hadn't even known had been passed. Honest, the first I knew that tattoos had been declared ungodly was when the boiler suit dudes appeared at my side, pulled up the

sleeves of my t-shirt and put me in the holding cage waiting for my turn at the frame. I thought the tattoo shops had closed of their own choice because they weren't making money but it must now be illegal to have tattoos, nice of them to tell us. Being burned with a branding iron really hurts.

But anyway, I stood next to the girl with the hair. Next on the frame was an older lady, she had comically half blond and half grey hair. I wondered if hair dye was now outlawed too. She cried and screamed obscenities when they branded her so got about 30 whacks with a cane. I think she must have passed out. There was a murmur in the crowd, but, again, it was difficult to tell if it was sympathy with the old bint or approval that such a wicked woman was being given a good dose of The Forge of God's law. There were scores of white boiler suits standing behind and among the onlookers. I kept my mouth shut, I'd had a few canings and hadn't enjoyed it.

I don't know an awful lot about chatting up girls, I'd never attempted it when sober, so said just "Hi" to the girl. She said Hi back. It seemed there had been enough branding for the day, one of the white suits gave a speech, the usual guff about what was and wasn't God's will, and we were free to carry on our way. I fell into step with hair girl but didn't talk again till we were 50 yards from the boiler suit dudes.

