

CORNCRAKE

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ISSUE 1



NESTING IN THE OAK OF
ENGLISH LITERATURE





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*A man who writes a book,
thinks himself wiser or wittier
than the rest of mankind; he
supposes that he can instruct or
amuse them, and the publick to
whom he appeals, must, after
all, be the judges of his
pretensions. - Dr Johnson*



Editor's Note

You are invited to witness the seminal issue of Corncrake, a magazine dedicated to celebrating Anglo literary culture past and present, and with the aim of spearheading its future!

This issue is just bulging with the choicest morsels of our past literary history, with a ghost story from M R James. In addition, we have fresh, new talent embodying the spirit of the fantastical and mythic with Degore alongside St Christopher and the Shark.

We hope you join us on this riveting escapade into the heroic, jolly, and sometimes daunting cultural memory of Albion and all of her sons.

This magazine can be nothing without YOU!

**Yes, you, the reader. I hereby call upon
writer, and artist: pen and canvas;
computer, and print to join us! Creations
rooted in the English tradition are welcome.**

Call of the Shieldmaiden
Editor-in-Chief



Woman's Constancy

Now thou has loved me one whole day,
Tomorrow when you leav'st, what wilt thou say?
Wilt thou then antedate some new-made vow?
Or say that now
We are not just those persons which we were?
Or, that oaths made in reverential fear
Of Love, and his wrath, any may forswear?
Or, as true deaths true marriages untie,
So lovers' contracts, images of those,
Bind but till sleep, death's image, them unloose?
Or, your own end to justify,
For having purposed change and falsehood, you
Can have no way but falsehood to be true?
Vain lunatic, against these 'scapes I could
Dispute and conquer, if I would,
Which I abstain to do,
For by tomorrow, I may think so too.

-JOHN DONNE

The Relic

When my grave is broke up again
Some second guest to entertain,
(For graves have learn'd that woman head,
To be to more than one a bed)
And he that digs it, spies
A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,
Will he not let us alone,
And think that there a loving couple lies,
Who thought that this device might be some way
To make their souls, at the last busy day,
Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?

If this fall in a time, or land,
Where mis-devotion doth command,
Then he, that digs us up, will bring
Us to the bishop, and the king,
To make us relics; then
Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I
A something else thereby;
All women shall adore us, and some men;
And since at such time miracles are sought,
I would have that age by this paper taught
What miracles we harmless lovers wrought.

First, we lov'd well and faithfully,
Yet knew not what we lov'd, nor why;
Difference of sex no more we knew
Than our guardian angels do;
Coming and going, we
Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals;
Our hands ne'er touch'd the seals
Which nature, injur'd by late law, sets free;
These miracles we did, but now alas,
All measure, and all language, I should pass,
Should I tell what a miracle she was.

-JOHN DONNE

St Christopher and the Shark

Carlo DiQuattrra



We were told in seminary that we would hear ninety-nine percent of the sins that people commit within the first year of our ordinations. That adulterers, thieves, liars, the lazy, the ignorant, the heretical - and more - would pull back the curtain, kneel, and whisper their wrongdoings to us and beg God for forgiveness. And I found this to be true. I thought I had gone through just about everything fairly quickly in my ministry. Like a game of bingo, though, every priest wishes to cleanse a soul from an egregious violation of "THOU SHALT NOT KILL". Such a horrific act recognized by the sinner and his mustering the willingness to comply with God's will of repentance is a rare occurrence. I may have been all too eager to check that box.

Engaging in the Sacraments can take priests out of themselves. Allowing the Good Lord to take over frequently gives a tangible sensation of being tugged just out of one's own body. The best way I can describe this sensation is through geometrical terms, regrettably, so please follow along to the best of your ability. I usually feel as though I'm an inch behind and above my body.

Think 'up one unit, over one unit' from high school mathematics. If this proves difficult for you, find a pen, an object (mug, checkbook, key, what have you), and a piece of paper. Trace an outline of the object, then move it to the right a hair, then up the page a hair.

Retrace. Remove the object from the page. The lower of the two is the body of a priest, the marginally higher the soul (or at least where the soul feels to be). I write this half-jokingly: I feel as holy as the laity make me out to be when I am in this mode.

Saturday is usually my day at St. Barnabas' to hear confessions. From half-twelve to quarter-to-five, I sit in the little wooden closet and act as a mediator, straining straying souls through the spin cycle. Hear the sin, meditate on them with the confessing party, briefly discuss routes for improvement, wait for an earnest Act of Contrition, assign penance, and wish them a nice afternoon. Confession is an overlooked Sacrament to be sure, so I derive pleasure in reminding parishioners of its importance and power. Get the weight off your chest! Clean slate! A few moments washing the immaterial portion of oneself and sainthood becomes achievable again... to most people.

As bad as his situation was, I am glad Christopher came to confess when he did. For those of you unfamiliar with this particular portion of the Roman Catholic practice, I cannot disclose the particularities of an individual's Sacrament. I can say things about confession, but I am forbidden to mention what was confessed. Confession is someone coming before God and asking for forgiveness; their sins are their own. I merely push 'Start' on the washing machine, so to speak. I ask for your

understanding if this story seems incomplete in that regard.

We were having a very usual Saturday afternoon when Christopher came into the confessional. A familiar face in the parish, but not so familiar that he needed constant counsel.

I smiled warmly over the little barrier before closing my eyes and started as usual,

“We begin in the name of The Father, and of The Son-”

“*Father Pat,*” Christopher whispered harshly. “*I’m not... here for Confession. Yet.*”

My hand hung in the air, halfway through making the sign of the Cross. I opened my eyes to see tears rolling down his face and disappearing into his beard.

“Chris,” I began. “This is for Confession. Could we perhaps meet after the five o’clock Mass is over?”

He shook his head. “*Father, I’m um... I’m not going to live until then,*” he whispered back. What in the world was he talking about? Not living ‘til six at the latest?

“What do you mean you ‘aren’t going to live until then’, Chris? What’s going on, dude?”

Dude. Once a staple of my vocabulary, it was no longer a word I got to use frequently enough in my collar. Christopher seemed like he could benefit from a friendlier tone in this instance. Christopher breathed deeply before bringing his hands to his face and sobbing into them.

God Almighty, I thought. Here’s a guy that shows up regularly for Mass, in good

clothes, donates amply to the parish, and is apparently stable otherwise. I couldn’t recall a time where someone in such a state wept so much in a confessional.

A few deep, quiet sobs later and Christopher regained a semblance of composure.

“Father Pat, I borrowed some money from some guys to cover my dad’s medical and funeral expenses...”

Lord have mercy. Here we go.

“And I had been paying them back in instalments, like we agreed.”

“Mhm.” I nodded. “Have they had enough instalments, Chris? They want the rest? Like, now?”

More tears. Instantaneous. I slouched back from the divider and put my forehead in my propped up arm.

“They don’t want money anymore, Father Pat. They want my freakin’ *head*.” Christopher sputtered. A spray of spittle was caught in the evening sun shining in through the cross-shaped cutout in the confessional door as he hung on to the *f* in *freakin’*.

Well, this was new. I had to think hard about how to settle this in the most reasonable manner my resources would allow. Could I help him out with parish funds and ask the Bishop for forgiveness? Should he take up shelter in the rectory until help could take him away? What if he was pulling my leg and just thought I would help out because I’m a priest? Did the police even know? So many questions so fast

is enough to make your head spin and make your soul snap right back into your body.

“Did you offer them everything else? Belongings, your house, investments, whatever?” I sat up a little straighter and took my head out of my hand.

Christopher just shook his head. This was not a ‘no’ of failure to explore this option, but a failure to have this option accepted by the other party.

“They want you that badly?” I squinted over the divider, blown away at the absurdity of the situation Christopher found himself in. I may have crossed a line at this point, evidenced by Christopher’s hands now clutching my shirt and shaking me back and forth.

“*For God’s SAKE, Father Pat! LISTEN to me! I. Am. About. To. Die. You can’t REASON with these people when- when, it’s too late in the day!*” More spittle - less visible, more tangible on my face. Finally aware of what he was doing, Christopher set me back down.

“Sorry, Father...” A half-hearted apology from a man whose mind was clearly plagued by more important thoughts. “They came up to me while I was collecting my mail this morning. Two of them - the guy I directly owed money to and - I guess - his driver? They made everything look normal by letting me go back inside my house. But then told me to go ‘put on something nice’. I thought I knew what they wanted, so I offered to give them

the next payment early - two weeks early, actually - but the driver just shook his head. I did what they told me to do and put this on.”

My heart started to sink. I looked over at Christopher and took in what he was wearing. I might have chosen something more... reverent, less flashy for the occasion. Maybe his best funeral garb was at the cleaner’s. Get a *GRIP*, Pat. Listen to yourself.

“If they wanted you... you know... what are you doing at St. Barnabas? Did you escape for a moment or something?” I chimed in, with great futility.

Christopher rolled his eyes, which I think may have been the last time he would ever do so. He wiped his face with his sleeve, cufflinks in the shape of golf bags making their presence known with a little clinking.

“Don’t jump the gun here. I’m fuckin’ getting to it, Father. Ah, sorry.” Christopher’s eyes started to well up with tears again at his explicit mistake, and I waved my hand dismissively.

“They had me leave my phone and wallet with my mail in the kitchen, but we locked my house up and they took my keys. When we got in their car, the guy I owed the money to sat next to me and held a shotgun to my side. He just shook his head the whole time, like, *sorry* that he had to do this. I wouldn’t dare try to leave the car or run when we got to where we were going, regardless.” A deep breath and a sigh, another wipe of the tears,

another clink. “We went to elementary school together, Father. We went to Our Lady together for *years*. This guy was my friend and I could tell he didn’t want to do whatever he was supposed to do with me here. When we finally stopped, I asked him: ‘Hey, can I make a request?’

And he goes, ‘What, you want a last meal or some shit?’

And I told him: ‘Look, if it has to be like this, can I go to confession first so that I at least go out clean? You know, how they told us at Our Lady?’

He shakes his head and he starts taking these deep breaths. I think I’m going out *right* there in the car. But then he asks what parish. So I tell him here, of course.”

I was frozen to my seat. The afternoon sun that usually warms the confessional and my black clothes seemed to have lost all power at this moment.

“And was this a cover-up? Are you here to make a confession, Chris?” I finally whisper to confirm my attention.

Sobbing from the other side of the confessional. Unrelenting, heavy, wet sobbing. I keep a box of tissues on my side of the confessional for emotional distress, but it appeared that I was out at this time. I started to stand up, hand on Christopher’s back.

“I’m going to get you some tissues. I’ll be-”

His arm shot out of his lap and a wet, bear trap of a grip latched on to my wrist. “Father Pat.” Jingle. “He’s out there.

Second pew on the, um, left. Gray suit.”

God, help us, I thought. He’s in here? I thought I had a problem with patience.

Transposition. Call it divine intervention (I know I am), if you wish. I felt myself slip into the familiar state of sacramental celebration. I stood, sturdily, given the circumstances laid out by Christopher, and opened the door to the central compartment of the confessional. I looked out to my left, Sinner’s Row, where those preparing to remove that title from themselves were waiting.

The first pew was empty to provide a marginal buffer of privacy to those in the confessional. The second was occupied by a man in a gray suit. His eyes bored, unblinking, into the door holding Christopher inside.

“You needn’t do this,” I said softly to the man, hardly looking his way. His eyes seemed to water for a second, but it could have been a trick of the afternoon sun. “Everyone, Confession is closed for the afternoon. I am sincerely sorry.”

I gently ushered the frustrated dozen other occupants of Sinner’s Row out of the church and locked it behind me. Each other door was given the same treatment. No one else might enter, but Christopher and his fellow alum would be able to leave upon the administration of the Sacrament. Given the dire circumstances, I deemed Last Rites more appropriate than

confession alone; if this man could not change his heart in the next few moments, I believed it would be of benefit to Christopher to expire with the graces imparted by anointing and Communion.

Haste was made to the sacristy to prepare the elements necessary for Last Rites and tissues as promised. At a loss for words, a simple prayer came forth from my thoughts: Almighty and Ever-loving Father, grant me the strength to prepare for you a saint, if it be Your will. Forgive this other man, for he knows not what he does. I opened the tabernacle and removed a pyx containing hosts normally reserved for hospital visits; given the pressing nature of the matter, more could be added if extras were present after the five o'clock Mass. I hurried back to the confessional carrying more than I ever thought I would into such a space. Once my door was closed and all sacramentals were laid out, the Rites began.

With as much composure as I could, I raised my hand to my forehead and picked up where Christopher and I had left off.

“In the name of The Father...”

Confession. Everything was laid out on the table for The Heavenly Father to forgive. I prayed silently as Christopher confessed that he had been as scrupulous as possible in the last few hours of his life. An Act of Contrition, spoken in bursts through tears and nose-blowing.

Penance was administered and performed immediately after.

I opened the pyx with bated breath and teary eyes. I picked the host up between two fingers, raised it, and faced Christopher. He had silently shifted to his knees in the time it took for me to get to this point.

“The Body of Christ, Christopher,” I muttered breathlessly.

“Amen,” whispered Christopher, sticking out his tongue. I placed the Eucharist, and he withdrew his tongue. I could tell that he was letting his saliva do the heavy lifting in getting the Eucharist integrated into his anatomy. I gave Christopher all the time he needed to complete this process before moving on to the Anointing - perhaps not required, but I never take shortcuts with Sacraments.

I rubbed my fingertips on a little cloth to remove any Eucharistic crumbs before picking up my book of Rites. I jumped to the Anointing and began. I tried to focus, but thoughts of alternative plans for the kneeling Christopher's passing flooded my mind as I went about the blessings.

Could I call the police in time to have him spared?

Would I be able to subdue the other man as they left the church?

Is it possible for me to follow them and interfere later?

Questions, branching diagrams of solutions, calculations, and a sense of bodily

futility swam as I rubbed oil on Christopher's forehead. He was all out of tears now, and his nose was entering its own season of drought. Upon completion of the Anointing, he sat in the confessional chair again. His breathing was slow. I think he was content with his spiritual health.

"Thank you, Father Pat. You're a great guy. I really hope to see you again when this is all over," said Christopher. His voice was steady. Good, I thought. Maybe he's thought of a way out too.

Christopher reached for the door and my heart leapt for my throat. He turned the knob halfway, the *shh-chik* cutting through the silence like the hourly bells. Christopher then let the knob go, *thunk*, bolt sliding back into its notch in the wall.

"Did... you think of a way out?" I said, facing Christopher.

A shadow crossed before my door, blocking the light for a split second.

Then I was blinded, two ways. The last thing I could see was the peaceful face of a cleansed soul taking in the afternoon sun. Perhaps memory has given way to some romanticization, but I believe the Good Lord may help preserve the authenticity of this moment in my mind: a tear-stained face given new shapes by the play of coloured light on creases, wrinkles, hair, and rigid features. This was a moment of peace most people could scarcely dream of having. It was

interrupted by gunfire from the only other man in the building.

I cannot recall the moment of impact; however, I don't think I need to. Blood sprayed into my eyes made gazing upon a dying saint impossible; the sound of a gun fired in such a confined area made hearing a dying saint just as difficult.

Tissues a few layers down helped restore my vision. Just a moment of silence restored my hearing. I flew out of the confessional through no will of my own. I was scared. I was worried. The Trinity working within me was not. My head nearly twisted off my shoulders looking for the man in the grey, and now likely red, suit.

"Show yourself and repent," I spoke, with more command than I typically allow into my voice, but no other sounds made themselves known to me. I marched up the aisles, looking for any sign of the man. Nothing. Nobody. All pews empty in all rows. Sacristy? Completely empty. Confessional across the way? Vacant. Outside? No vehicles other than those belonging to the parish, no traffic patterns indicating a reaction to a fleeing vehicle. I went back inside the church and avoided the confessional where Saint Christopher, patron of those indebted to loan sharks, lay with most of his visceral cells starting to receive the news that their services were no longer needed. The Sacristy was the right place to go for now. I phoned the

police, the bishop, and the
rectory, in that order.

The Fifth Commandment

would remain unticked on my
bingo sheet for now.



Number 13

M R James



Among the towns of Jutland, Viborg justly holds a high place. It is the seat of a bishopric; it has a handsome but almost entirely new cathedral, a charming garden, a lake of great beauty, and many storks. Near it is Hald, accounted one of the prettiest things in Denmark; and hard by is Finderup, where Marsk Stig murdered King Erik Glipping on St Cecilia's Day, in the year 1286. Fifty-six blows of square-headed iron maces were traced on Erik's skull when his tomb was opened in the seventeenth century. But I am not writing a guide-book.

There are good hotels in Viborg—Preisler's and the Phoenix are all that can be desired. But my cousin, whose experiences I have to tell you now, went to the Golden Lion the first time that he visited Viborg. He has not been there since, and the following pages will, perhaps, explain the reason of his abstention.

The Golden Lion is one of the very few houses in the town that were not destroyed in the great fire of 1726, which practically demolished the cathedral, the Sognekirke, the Raadhuus, and so much else that was old and interesting. It is a great red-brick house—that is, the front is of brick, with corbie steps on the gables and a text over the door; but the courtyard into which the omnibus drives is of black and white wood and plaster.

The sun was declining in the heaven when my cousin walked up to the door, and the light

smote full upon the imposing façade of the house. He was delighted with the old-fashioned aspect of the place, and promised himself a thoroughly satisfactory and amusing stay in an inn so typical of old Jutland.

It was not business in the ordinary sense of the word that had brought Mr Anderson to Viborg. He was engaged upon some researches into the Church history of Denmark, and it had come to his knowledge that in the Rigsarkiv of Viborg there were papers, saved from the fire, relating to the last days of Roman Catholicism in the country. He proposed, therefore, to spend a considerable time—perhaps as much as a fortnight or three weeks—in examining and copying these, and he hoped that the Golden Lion would be able to give him a room of sufficient size to serve alike as a bedroom and a study. His wishes were explained to the landlord, and, after a certain amount of thought, the latter suggested that perhaps it might be the best way for the gentleman to look at one or two of the larger rooms and pick one for himself. It seemed a good idea.

The top floor was soon rejected as entailing too much getting upstairs after the day's work; the second floor contained no room of exactly the dimensions required; but on the first floor there was a choice of two or three rooms which would, so far as size went, suit admirably.

The landlord was strongly in favour of Number 17, but Mr Anderson pointed out that its windows commanded only the blank wall of the next house, and that it would be very dark in the afternoon. Either Number 12 or Number 14 would be better, for both of them looked on the street, and the bright evening light and the pretty view would more than compensate him for the additional amount of noise.

Eventually Number 12 was selected. Like its neighbours, it had three windows, all on one side of the room; it was fairly high and unusually long. There was, of course, no fireplace, but the stove was handsome and rather old—a cast-iron erection, on the side of which was a representation of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, and the inscription, “I Bog Mose, Cap. 22,” above. Nothing else in the room was remarkable; the only interesting picture was an old coloured print of the town, date about 1820.

Supper-time was approaching, but when Anderson, refreshed by the ordinary ablutions, descended the staircase, there were still a few minutes before the bell rang. He devoted them to examining the list of his fellow-lodgers. As is usual in Denmark, their names were displayed on a large blackboard, divided into columns and lines, the numbers of the rooms being painted in at the beginning of each line. The list was not exciting. There was an advocate, or Sagfører, a

German, and some bagmen from Copenhagen. The one and only point which suggested any food for thought was the absence of any Number 13 from the tale of the rooms, and even this was a thing which Anderson had already noticed half a dozen times in his experience of Danish hotels. He could not help wondering whether the objection to that particular number, common as it is, was so widespread and so strong as to make it difficult to let a room so ticketed, and he resolved to ask the landlord if he and his colleagues in the profession had actually met with many clients who refused to be accommodated in the thirteenth room.

He had nothing to tell me (I am giving the story as I heard it from him) about what passed at supper, and the evening, which was spent in unpacking and arranging his clothes, books, and papers, was not more eventful. Towards eleven o'clock he resolved to go to bed, but with him, as with a good many other people nowadays, an almost necessary preliminary to bed, if he meant to sleep, was the reading of a few pages of print, and he now remembered that the particular book which he had been reading in the train, and which alone would satisfy him at that present moment, was in the pocket of his great-coat, then hanging on a peg outside the dining-room.

To run down and secure it was the work of a moment, and, as the passages were by no means dark, it was not difficult for him to find his way back to his own door. So, at least, he thought; but when he arrived there, and turned the handle, the door entirely refused to open, and he caught the sound of a hasty movement towards it from within. He had tried the wrong door, of course. Was his own room to the right or to the left? He glanced at the number: it was 13. His room would be on the left; and so it was. And not before he had been in bed for some minutes, had read his wonted three or four pages of his book, blown out his light, and turned over to go to sleep, did it occur to him that, whereas on the blackboard of the hotel there had been no Number 13, there was undoubtedly a room numbered 13 in the hotel. He felt rather sorry he had not chosen it for his own. Perhaps he might have done the landlord a little service by occupying it, and given him the chance of saying that a well-born English gentleman had lived in it for three weeks and liked it very much. But probably it was used as a servant's room or something of the kind. After all, it was most likely not so large or good a room as his own. And he looked drowsily about the room, which was fairly perceptible in the half-light from the street-lamp. It was a curious effect, he thought. Rooms usually look larger in a dim light than a full one, but this seemed to have

contracted in length and grown proportionately higher. Well, well! sleep was more important than these vague ruminations—and to sleep he went.

On the day after his arrival Anderson attacked the Rigsarkiv of Viborg. He was, as one might expect in Denmark, kindly received, and access to all that he wished to see was made as easy for him as possible. The documents laid before him were far more numerous and interesting than he had at all anticipated. Besides official papers, there was a large bundle of correspondence relating to Bishop Jørgen Friis, the last Roman Catholic who held the see, and in these there cropped up many amusing and what are called "intimate" details of private life and individual character. There was much talk of a house owned by the Bishop, but not inhabited by him, in the town. Its tenant was apparently somewhat of a scandal and a stumbling-block to the reforming party. He was a disgrace, they wrote, to the city; he practised secret and wicked arts, and had sold his soul to the enemy. It was of a piece with the gross corruption and superstition of the Babylonish Church that such a viper and blood sucking *Troldmand* should be patronized and harboured by the Bishop. The Bishop met these reproaches boldly; he protested his own abhorrence of all such things as secret arts, and required his antagonists to bring the matter before the proper court—

of course, the spiritual court—and sift it to the bottom. No one could be more ready and willing than himself to condemn Mag Nicolas Francken if the evidence showed him to have been guilty of any of the crimes informally alleged against him.

Anderson had not time to do more than glance at the next letter of the Protestant leader, Rasmus Nielsen, before the record office was closed for the day, but he gathered its general tenor, which was to the effect that Christian men were now no longer bound by the decisions of Bishops of Rome, and that the Bishop's Court was not, and could not be, a fit or competent tribunal to judge so grave and weighty a cause.

On leaving the office, Mr Anderson was accompanied by the old gentleman who presided over it, and, as they walked, the conversation very naturally turned to the papers of which I have just been speaking.

Herr Scavenius, the Archivist of Viborg, though very well informed as to the general run of the documents under his charge, was not a specialist in those of the Reformation period. He was much interested in what Anderson had to tell him about them. He looked forward with great pleasure, he said, to seeing the publication in which Mr Anderson spoke of embodying their contents. "This house of the Bishop Friis," he added, "it is a great puzzle to me where it can have stood. I have studied

carefully the topography of old Viborg, but it is most unlucky—of the old terrier of the Bishop's property which was made in 1560, and of which we have the greater part in the Arkiv, just the piece which had the list of the town property is missing. Never mind. Perhaps I shall some day succeed to find him."

After taking some exercise—I forget exactly how or where—Anderson went back to the Golden Lion, his supper, his game of patience, and his bed. On the way to his room it occurred to him that he had forgotten to talk to the landlord about the omission of Number 13 from the hotel board, and also that he might as well make sure that Number 13 did actually exist before he made any reference to the matter.

The decision was not difficult to arrive at. There was the door with its number as plain as could be, and work of some kind was evidently going on inside it, for as he neared the door he could hear footsteps and voices, or a voice, within. During the few seconds in which he halted to make sure of the number, the footsteps ceased, seemingly very near the door, and he was a little startled at hearing a quick hissing breathing as of a person in strong excitement. He went on to his own room, and again he was surprised to find how much smaller it seemed now than it had when he selected it. It was a slight disappointment, but only slight. If he found it really not large

enough, he could very easily shift to another. In the meantime he wanted something—as far as I remember it was a pocket-handkerchief—out of his portmanteau, which had been placed by the porter on a very inadequate trestle or stool against the wall at the farthest end of the room from his bed. Here was a very curious thing: the portmanteau was not to be seen. It had been moved by officious servants; doubtless the contents had been put in the wardrobe. No, none of them were there. This was vexatious. The idea of a theft he dismissed at once. Such things rarely happen in Denmark, but some piece of stupidity had certainly been performed (which is not so uncommon), and the *stuepige* must be severely spoken to. Whatever it was that he wanted, it was not so necessary to his comfort that he could not wait till the morning for it, and he therefore settled not to ring the bell and disturb the servants. He went to the window—the right-hand window it was—and looked out on the quiet street. There was a tall building opposite, with large spaces of dead wall; no passers-by; a dark night; and very little to be seen of any kind.

The light was behind him, and he could see his own shadow clearly cast on the wall opposite. Also the shadow of the bearded man in Number 11 on the left, who passed to and fro in shirtsleeves once or twice, and was seen first brushing his hair,

and later on in a nightgown. Also the shadow of the occupant of Number 13 on the right. This might be more interesting. Number 13 was, like himself, leaning on his elbows on the window-sill looking out into the street. He seemed to be a tall thin man—or was it by any chance a woman?—at least, it was someone who covered his or her head with some kind of drapery before going to bed, and, he thought, must be possessed of a red lampshade—and the lamp must be flickering very much. There was a distinct playing up and down of a dull red light on the opposite wall. He craned out a little to see if he could make any more of the figure, but beyond a fold of some light, perhaps white, material on the window-sill he could see nothing.

Now came a distant step in the street, and its approach seemed to recall Number 13 to a sense of his exposed position, for very swiftly and suddenly he swept aside from the window, and his red light went out. Anderson, who had been smoking a cigarette, laid the end of it on the window-sill and went to bed.

Next morning he was woken by the *stuepige* with hot water, etc. He roused himself, and after thinking out the correct Danish words, said as distinctly as he could:

“You must not move my portmanteau. Where is it?”

As is not uncommon, the maid laughed, and went away without making any distinct answer.

Anderson, rather irritated, sat up in bed, intending to call her back, but he remained sitting up, staring straight in front of him. There was his portmanteau on its trestle, exactly where he had seen the porter put it when he first arrived. This was a rude shock for a man who prided himself on his accuracy of observation. How it could possibly have escaped him the night before he did not pretend to understand; at any rate, there it was now.

The daylight showed more than the portmanteau; it let the true proportions of the room with its three windows appear, and satisfied its tenant that his choice after all had not been a bad one. When he was almost dressed he walked to the middle one of the three windows to look out at the weather. Another shock awaited him. Strangely unobservant he must have been last night. He could have sworn ten times over that he had been smoking at the right-hand window the last thing before he went to bed, and here was his cigarette-end on the sill of the middle window.

He started to go down to breakfast. Rather late, but Number 13 was later: here were his boots still outside his door—a gentleman's boots. So then Number 13 was a man, not a woman. Just then he caught sight of the number on the door. It was 14. He thought he must have passed Number 13 without noticing it. Three stupid mistakes in twelve hours were too much

for a methodical, accurate-minded man, so he turned back to make sure. The next number to 14 was number 12, his own room. There was no Number 13 at all.

After some minutes devoted to a careful consideration of everything he had had to eat and drink during the last twenty-four hours, Anderson decided to give the question up. If his eyes or his brain were giving way he would have plenty of opportunities for ascertaining that fact; if not, then he was evidently being treated to a very interesting experience. In either case the development of events would certainly be worth watching.

During the day he continued his examination of the episcopal correspondence which I have already summarized. To his disappointment, it was incomplete. Only one other letter could be found which referred to the affair of Mag Nicolas Francken. It was from the Bishop Jörgen Friis to Rasmus Nielsen. He said:

“Although we are not in the least degree inclined to assent to your judgement concerning our court, and shall be prepared if need be to withstand you to the uttermost in that behalf, yet forasmuch as our trusty and well-beloved Mag Nicolas Francken, against whom you have dared to allege certain false and malicious charges, hath been suddenly removed from among us, it is apparent that the question for this time falls. But forasmuch as

you further allege that the Apostle and Evangelist St John in his heavenly Apocalypse describes the Holy Roman Church under the guise and symbol of the Scarlet Woman, be it known to you," etc.

Search as he might, Anderson could find no sequel to this letter nor any clue to the cause or manner of the "removal" of the *casus belli*. He could only suppose that Francken had died suddenly; and as there were only two days between the date of Nielsen's last letter—when Francken was evidently still in being—and that of the Bishop's letter, the death must have been completely unexpected.

In the afternoon he paid a short visit to Hald, and took his tea at Baekkelund; nor could he notice, though he was in a somewhat nervous frame of mind, that there was any indication of such a failure of eye or brain as his experiences of the morning had led him to fear.

At supper he found himself next to the landlord.

"What," he asked him, after some indifferent conversation, "is the reason why in most of the hotels one visits in this country the number thirteen is left out of the list of rooms? I see you have none here."

The landlord seemed amused.

"To think that you should have noticed a thing like that! I've thought about it once or twice myself, to tell the truth. An educated man, I've said, has no business with these superstitious

notions. I was brought up myself here in the high school of Viborg, and our old master was always a man to set his face against anything of that kind. He's been dead now this many years—a fine upstanding man he was, and ready with his hands as well as his head. I recollect us boys, one snowy day—"

Here he plunged into reminiscence.

"Then you don't think there is any particular objection to having a Number 13?" said Anderson.

"Ah! to be sure. Well, you understand, I was brought up to the business by my poor old father. He kept an hotel in Aarhus first, and then, when we were born, he moved to Viborg here, which was his native place, and had the Phoenix here until he died. That was in 1876. Then I started business in Silkeborg, and only the year before last I moved into this house."

Then followed more details as to the state of the house and business when first taken over.

"And when you came here, was there a Number 13?"

"No, no. I was going to tell you about that. You see, in a place like this, the commercial class—the travellers—are what we have to provide for in general. And put them in Number 13? Why, they'd as soon sleep in the street, or sooner. As far as I'm concerned myself, it wouldn't make a penny difference to me what the number of my room was, and so I've often said to them; but they

stick to it that it brings them bad luck. Quantities of stories they have among them of men that have slept in a Number 13 and never been the same again, or lost their best customers, or—one thing and another,” said the landlord, after searching for a more graphic phrase.

“Then, what do you use your Number 13 for?” said Anderson, conscious as he said the words of a curious anxiety quite disproportionate to the importance of the question.

“My Number 13? Why, don’t I tell you that there isn’t such a thing in the house? I thought you might have noticed that. If there was it would be next door to your own room.”

“Well, yes; only I happened to think—that is, I fancied last night that I had seen a door numbered thirteen in that passage; and, really, I am almost certain I must have been right, for I saw it the night before as well.”

Of course, Herr Kristensen laughed this notion to scorn, as Anderson had expected, and emphasized with much iteration the fact that no Number 13 existed or had existed before him in that hotel.

Anderson was in some ways relieved by his certainty, but still puzzled, and he began to think that the best way to make sure whether he had indeed been subject to an illusion or not was to invite the landlord to his room to smoke a cigar later on in the evening. Some photographs of English towns which he had with

him formed a sufficiently good excuse.

Herr Kristensen was flattered by the invitation, and most willingly accepted it. At about ten o’clock he was to make his appearance, but before that Anderson had some letters to write, and retired for the purpose of writing them. He almost blushed to himself at confessing it, but he could not deny that it was the fact that he was becoming quite nervous about the question of the existence of Number 13; so much so that he approached his room by way of Number 11, in order that he might not be obliged to pass the door, or the place where the door ought to be. He looked quickly and suspiciously about the room when he entered it, but there was nothing, beyond that indefinable air of being smaller than usual, to warrant any misgivings. There was no question of the presence or absence of his portmanteau tonight. He had himself emptied it of its contents and lodged it under his bed. With a certain effort he dismissed the thought of Number 13 from his mind, and sat down to his writing.

His neighbours were quiet enough. Occasionally a door opened in the passage and a pair of boots was thrown out, or a bagman walked past humming to himself, and outside, from time to time, a cart thundered over the atrocious cobble-stones, or a quick step hurried along the flags.

Anderson finished his letters, ordered in whisky and soda, and then went to the window and studied the dead wall opposite and the shadows upon it.

As far as he could remember, Number 14 had been occupied by the lawyer, a staid man, who said little at meals, being generally engaged in studying a small bundle of papers beside his plate. Apparently, however, he was in the habit of giving vent to his animal spirits when alone. Why else should he be dancing? The shadow from the next room evidently showed that he was. Again and again his thin form crossed the window, his arms waved, and a gaunt leg was kicked up with surprising agility. He seemed to be barefooted, and the floor must be well laid, for no sound betrayed his movements. Sagfører Herr Anders Jensen, dancing at ten o'clock at night in a hotel bedroom, seemed a fitting subject for a historical painting in the grand style; and Anderson's thoughts, like those of Emily in the "Mysteries of Udolpho", began to "arrange themselves in the following lines":

*"When I return to my hotel,
At ten o'clock p.m.,
The waiters think I am unwell;
I do not care for them.
But when I've locked my chamber
door,
And put my boots outside,
I dance all night upon the floor.
And even if my neighbours swore,
I'd go on dancing all the more,
For I'm acquainted with the law,*

*And in despite of all their jaw,
Their protests I deride."*

Had not the landlord at this moment knocked at the door, it is probable that quite a long poem might have been laid before the reader. To judge from his look of surprise when he found himself in the room, Herr Kristensen was struck, as Anderson had been, by something unusual in its aspect. But he made no remark. Anderson's photographs interested him mightily, and formed the text of many autobiographical discourses. Nor is it quite clear how the conversation could have been diverted into the desired channel of Number 13, had not the lawyer at this moment begun to sing, and to sing in a manner which could leave no doubt in anyone's mind that he was either exceedingly drunk or raving mad. It was a high, thin voice that they heard, and it seemed dry, as if from long disuse. Of words or tune there was no question. It went sailing up to a surprising height, and was carried down with a despairing moan as of a winter wind in a hollow chimney, or an organ whose wind fails suddenly. It was a really horrible sound, and Anderson felt that if he had been alone he must have fled for refuge and society to some neighbour bagman's room.

The landlord sat open mouthed.

"I don't understand it," he said at last, wiping his forehead. "It is dreadful. I have heard it once

before, but I made sure it was a cat.”

“Is he mad?” said Anderson.

“He must be; and what a sad thing! Such a good customer, too, and so successful in his business, by what I hear, and a young family to bring up.”

Just then came an impatient knock at the door, and the knocker entered, without waiting to be asked. It was the lawyer, in *déshabille* and very rough-haired; and very angry he looked.

“I beg pardon, sir,” he said, “but I should be much obliged if you would kindly desist—”

Here he stopped, for it was evident that neither of the persons before him was responsible for the disturbance; and after a moment’s lull it swelled forth again more wildly than before.

“But what in the name of Heaven does it mean?” broke out the lawyer. “Where is it? Who is it? Am I going out of my mind?”

“Surely, Herr Jensen, it comes from your room next door? Isn’t there a cat or something stuck in the chimney?”

This was the best that occurred to Anderson to say, and he realized its futility as he spoke; but anything was better than to stand and listen to that horrible voice, and look at the broad, white face of the landlord, all perspiring and quivering as he clutched the arms of his chair.

“Impossible,” said the lawyer, “impossible. There is no chimney. I came here because I

was convinced the noise was going on here. It was certainly in the next room to mine.”

“Was there no door between yours and mine?” said Anderson eagerly.

“No, sir,” said Herr Jensen, rather sharply. “At least, not this morning.”

“Ah!” said Anderson. “Nor tonight?”

“I am not sure,” said the lawyer with some hesitation.

Suddenly the crying or singing voice in the next room died away, and the singer was heard seemingly to laugh to himself in a crooning manner. The three men actually shivered at the sound. Then there was a silence.

“Come,” said the lawyer, “what have you to say, Herr Kristensen? What does this mean?”

“Good Heaven!” said Kristensen. “How should I tell! I know no more than you, gentlemen. I pray I may never hear such a noise again.”

“So do I,” said Herr Jensen, and he added something under his breath. Anderson thought it sounded like the last words of the Psalter, “*omnis spiritus laudet Dominum*,” but he could not be sure.

“But we must do something,” said Anderson—“the three of us. Shall we go and investigate in the next room?”

“But that is Herr Jensen’s room,” wailed the landlord. “It is no use; he has come from there himself.”

“I am not so sure,” said Jensen. “I think this gentleman is right: we must go and see.”

The only weapons of defence that could be mustered on the spot were a stick and umbrella. The expedition went out into the passage, not without quakings. There was a deadly quiet outside, but a light shone from under the next door. Anderson and Jensen approached it. The latter turned the handle, and gave a sudden vigorous push. No use. The door stood fast.

“Herr Kristensen,” said Jensen, “will you go and fetch the strongest servant you have in the place? We must see this through.”

The landlord nodded, and hurried off, glad to be away from the scene of action. Jensen and Anderson remained outside looking at the door.

“It is Number 13, you see,” said the latter.

“Yes; there is your door, and there is mine,” said Jensen.

“My room has three windows in the daytime,” said Anderson, with difficulty suppressing a nervous laugh.

“By George, so has mine!” said the lawyer, turning and looking at Anderson. His back was now to the door. In that moment the door opened, and an arm came out and clawed at his shoulder. It was clad in ragged, yellowish linen, and the bare skin, where it could be seen, had long grey hair upon it.

Anderson was just in time to pull Jensen out of its reach with a

cry of disgust and fright, when the door shut again, and a low laugh was heard.

Jensen had seen nothing, but when Anderson hurriedly told him what a risk he had run, he fell into a great state of agitation, and suggested that they should retire from the enterprise and lock themselves up in one or other of their rooms.

However, while he was developing this plan, the landlord and two able-bodied men arrived on the scene, all looking rather serious and alarmed. Jensen met them with a torrent of description and explanation, which did not at all tend to encourage them for the fray.

The men dropped the crowbars they had brought, and said flatly that they were not going to risk their throats in that devil’s den. The landlord was miserably nervous and undecided, conscious that if the danger were not faced his hotel was ruined, and very loth to face it himself. Luckily Anderson hit upon a way of rallying the demoralized force.

“Is this,” he said, “the Danish courage I have heard so much of? It isn’t a German in there, and if it was, we are five to one.”

The two servants and Jensen were stung into action by this, and made a dash at the door.

“Stop!” said Anderson. “Don’t lose your heads. You stay out here with the light, landlord, and one of you two men break in the door, and don’t go in when it gives way.”

The men nodded, and the younger stepped forward, raised his crowbar, and dealt a tremendous blow on the upper panel. The result was not in the least what any of them anticipated. There was no cracking or rending of wood—only a dull sound, as if the solid wall had been struck. The man dropped his tool with a shout, and began rubbing his elbow. His cry drew their eyes upon him for a moment; then Anderson looked at the door again. It was gone; the plaster wall of the passage stared him in the face, with a considerable gash in it where the crowbar had struck it. Number 13 had passed out of existence.

For a brief space they stood perfectly still, gazing at the blank wall. An early cock in the yard beneath was heard to crow; and as Anderson glanced in the direction of the sound, he saw through the window at the end of the long passage that the eastern sky was paling to the dawn.

“Perhaps,” said the landlord, with hesitation, “you gentlemen would like another room for tonight—a double-bedded one?”

Neither Jensen nor Anderson was averse to the suggestion. They felt inclined to hunt in couples after their late experience. It was found convenient, when each of them went to his room to collect the articles he wanted for the night,

that the other should go with him and hold the candle. They noticed that both Number 12 and Number 14 had *three* windows.

Next morning the same party reassembled in Number 12. The landlord was naturally anxious to avoid engaging outside help, and yet it was imperative that the mystery attaching to that part of the house should be cleared up. Accordingly the two servants had been induced to take upon them the function of carpenters. The furniture was cleared away, and, at the cost of a good many irretrievably damaged planks, that portion of the floor was taken up which lay nearest to Number 14.

You will naturally suppose that a skeleton—say that of Mag Nicolas Francken—was discovered. That was not so. What they did find lying between the beams which supported the flooring was a small copper box. In it was a neatly-folded vellum document, with about twenty lines of writing. Both Anderson and Jensen (who proved to be something of a palæographer) were much excited by this discovery, which promised to afford the key to these extraordinary phenomena.

I possess a copy of an astrological work which I have never read. It has, by way of frontispiece, a woodcut by Hans

Sebald Beham, representing a number of sages seated round a table. This detail may enable connoisseurs to identify the book. I cannot myself recollect its title, and it is not at this moment within reach; but the fly-leaves of it are covered with writing, and, during the ten years in which I have owned the volume, I have not been able to determine which way up this writing ought to be read, much less in what language it is. Not dissimilar was the position of Anderson and Jensen after the protracted examination to which they submitted the document in the copper box.

After two days' contemplation of it, Jensen, who was the bolder spirit of the two, hazarded the conjecture that the language was either Latin or Old Danish.

Anderson ventured upon no surmises, and was very willing to surrender the box and the parchment to the Historical

Society of Viborg to be placed in their museum.

I had the whole story from him a few months later, as we sat in a wood near Upsala, after a visit to the library there, where we—or, rather, I—had laughed over the contract by which Daniel Salthenius (in later life Professor of Hebrew at Königsberg) sold himself to Satan. Anderson was not really amused.

“Young idiot!” he said, meaning Salthenius, who was only an undergraduate when he committed that indiscretion, “how did he know what company he was courting?”

And when I suggested the usual considerations, he only grunted. That same afternoon he told me what you have read; but he refused to draw any inferences from it, and to assent to any that I drew for him.



The Anniversary

All Kings, and all their favourites,
All glory of honours, beauties, wits,
The sun itself, which makes times, as they pass,
Is elder by a year now than it was
When thou and I first one another saw:
All other things to their destruction draw,
Only our love hath no decay;
This no tomorrow hath, nor yesterday,
Running it never runs from us away,
But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day.

Two graves must hide thine and my corse;
If one might, death were no divorce.
Alas, as well as other Princes, we
(Who Prince enough in one another be)
Must leave at last in death these eyes and ears,
Oft fed with true oaths, and with sweet salt tears;
But souls where nothing dwells but love
(All other thoughts being inmates) then shall prove
This, or a love increased there above,
When bodies to their graves, souls from their graves remove.

And then we shall be thoroughly blessed;
But we no more than all the rest.
Here upon earth we're Kings, and none but we
Can be such Kings, nor of such subjects be;
Who is so safe as we? where none can do
Treason to us, except one of us two.
True and false fears let us refrain,
Let us love nobly, and live, and add again
Years and years unto years, till we attain
To write threescore: this is the second of our reign.

- JOHN DONNE

Featured Artist

JuniperTree

X: @underajuniper





Tell us a little bit about yourself.

I'm a Catholic wife and mother of 5. I went to school for engineering, but have been painting since I was in elementary school and just never stopped.

Do you have a preferred medium and what do you think of it?

I prefer water mixable oils because they are so forgiving! They give me a long enough working time and allow me to make changes and fix mistakes throughout the painting process. I don't actually like drawing very much and mostly use it as a way to work out ideas before moving on to paint.

As this is a literature magazine, can you tell us what type of things you have been reading recently?

I'm currently in the middle of my second read through of the Book of the New Sun series by Gene Wolfe. Mostly I end up reading a lot of children's literature. Our most recent family favorite was *The Witches* by Roald Dahl

How do you find the subject matter for your paintings?

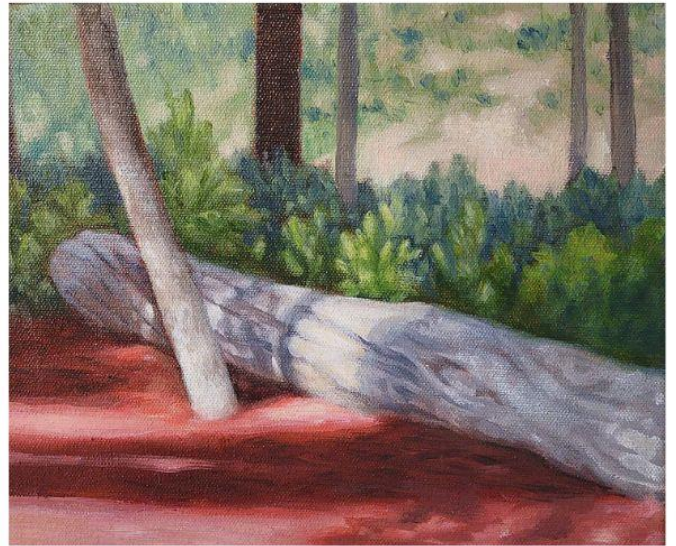
My family likes to hike and camp, so some come directly from experiences in nature. Others come from using a single word as a springboard and others from interest in a particular mythological or religious story. The green painting that is an...



...allegory of nuclear power actually came from the word "decay," for instance.

Asside from painting, do you have any other passions?

My husband and I both like to eat and like to cook, so family meals can be a little over the top. I also have a strong need to be outdoors regularly, whether that's while running, camping, or just going out to nearby field. I can't sit still long enough to watch many films, so I'm probably the least culturally informed person I know-



Cover: St Christopher and the Shark
Page 2: Underwater Panther
Page 30: The Three Ravens
Page 31: Hare Coursing
Page 32: Thunderbird
Page 33: Desert Creatures & Fallen Log



Break of Day

'Tis true, 'tis day, what though it be?
O wilt thou therefore rise from me?
Why should we rise because 'tis light?
Did we lie down because 'twas night?
Love, which in spite of darkness brought us hither,
Should in despite of light keep us together.

Light hath no tongue, but is all eye;
If it could speak as well as spy,
This were the worst that it could say,
That being well I fain would stay,
And that I loved my heart and honour so,
That I would not from him, that had them, go.

Must business thee from hence remove?
Oh, that's the worst disease of love,
The poor, the foul, the false, love can
Admit, but not the busied man.
He which hath business, and makes love, doth do
Such wrong, as when a married man doth woo.

- JOHN DONNE

Erika Olafsdottir

Part 1

N.D. Wallace-Swan



Part I:

Glinting rays of light shone over the mountaintops to the east of Reykholt. Ólafur Haroldsson left his sick wife's side and tended to the hearth. His old hands, chapped, worked to get on his shoes. He grabbed the washing basket and made his way from his turf home towards the hot pools along the meandering creek Hvita. Dipping his clothes in one at a time, using shore sands to work out the dried bloody sputum, he noticed his daughter Erika had followed him.

“Pabbi, how is Mama? Is she going to be okay?”

“God knows and loves us, we should not worry,” he said to her. But he was worried. This was his third trip to the river this week.

The creek ran a slight pink around Ólafur as he scrubbed the woollen fabric. He was standing in a small warm spring that connected to the creek. At one edge the heat bubbled the mud. The fires of hell wished to escape. He stood off in a cooler portion where the heat helped in the washing but did not scorch his shins. His hands, though, suffered dearly.

“Girl, go and fetch your brother.”

Erika took off towards her brother Harold's house. Harold was her half-brother, about sixteen summers older. He was born to a different mother than

Erika, Thordis. She had been slain by Barbary pirates while visiting her brother in Grindavik in the south. The Mohammedan raiders slew anyone who resisted.

Her brother, Magni Ingolfur raised arms against the invaders, along with his three sons. The sudden attack had them at a disadvantage, but Thordis, her brother and three nephews, along with a handful of other village folk engaged the raiders. Many were able to escape while the battle raged, but the heathens managed to take a dozen or so back to their evil vessels to some unknown place. Thordis, her brother, and nephew Gunni were killed, along with many villagers. They were buried in the churchyard. Later it was learned that the raiders had attacked other villages as well, including the Westman Islands further southeast, wiping out nearly half of the town there.

As a result, the South Coast became well-armed with a supply of weapons caches from the Danish Crown. However, these weapons eventually went to rust as no more raiders tried again, perhaps having had their fill of blonde beauties in more ways than one.

Ólafur was ringing out his last piece and Erika showed up once more behind him with Harold.

“Hail,” Harold said.

Ólafur's spine creaked as he turned to greet his son, while placing the last piece in the basket, cleaned and done.

"Son, Asta remains ill. The pass is open, and I need to get Holurt flowers. It may help her heal."

"The one with the flies?" Asked Harold.

"Yes, that one. It will take a few days to..."

Harold interrupted his father, "Yes, it is no problem father, I will go get some, I will get much, maybe we can keep some dried for another time."

"Take Erika with you," said Ólafur, "...she can learn by doing."

Harold agreed, and they made their way back to the homestead. Along the way, Harold said he would go home to pack and prepare and meet them at Ólafur's house. Erika would be preparing as well.

Ólafur and Erika returned home. Asta was sitting up, coughing into a rag, the sputum wasn't red, only light pink. She was drinking hot moss tea, which she found soothing. She greeted them as they entered but she did not rise. Ólafur started hanging the woollen cloth in the rafters so they would dry. The updrafts from the hearth stirred the textiles which flowed like drifting snow, making the darkened turf

house seem like a magical pagan temple of a bygone age. It was magical to the young girl, contrasting with the gloomy ambiance of an ill mother at home.

"My dear," coughed Asta, "how has your morning been? Is it beautiful outside?"

Erika nodded, "Yes Mama."

Ólafur told his wife that Harold is taking their daughter to gather Holurt flowers in the mountains to the east, that they might help her mother feel better. Erika smiled proudly.

"Very well my dear," Asta said to Erika. "You should quite enjoy the mountains, they are most alluring in the summer, covered in beautiful flowers, and when you are that high up, it hardly gets dark for long. You will need a thick blanket to cover your face to get sleep. Now go with Pabbi and pack for your trip."

Soon after, Asta began coughing. The sputum went from a light pink to a deep red. Ólafur comforted her but to no avail. Her coughing stopped after some minutes, and she laid down, moaning lightly. She was finally able to breathe.

Erika and her father quickly packed her hiking kit, including a wrap of furs, a blanket, clothes, and a sheepskin. She would need to build a shelter with stones and use the skin as a roof over her

head at night. There were no dangerous animals, but the cold winds could catch her cold. They packed dried cod, Hardfisk, flatbread, and a wineskin which they filled with water. There were plenty of streams along the way, so there was no need to bring much.

Erika was fitted with extra thick hide boots, a woollen hat and a tunic, and so they waited for Harold.

Harold arrived soon after, ready to go. He had spoken with his wife Harpa, who was with a child which had just quickened last week. Ólafur would be helping her with the sheep as needed, so she would not be overworked.

They gave their parents the traditional goodbyes, Ólafur wishing them luck while Asta tried not to speak, as it pained her lungs. The pair made their way up the valley toward the mountains to the east. The sun shone brightly overhead, bouncing off Erika's bright blonde braided hair.

The siblings headed east, up the valley east of Reykholt. They camped along the way, lighting fires with some gathered dried moss and sheep dung. The sheep dung was only present for a little while before the fields halted as the animals would range no further than the grass, where they rested..

“Harold, tell me about your mother. What was she like?”

“First, pass me some of that hard fish,” he said Erika reached into the food pouch and unwrapped the dried fish, handing a portion to Harold. No story can begin without an offering of food.

“My mother was from Grindavik in the south and trained as a scribe for my grandfather Egil. That is how she ended up here, meeting our father long before you came around. My grandfather was Magni in Grindavik, as his father Ingolfur before him. She descended from the first settler Molda-Gnuper Hrolfsson.”

“What happened to her?”

“She was visiting her father's grave and staying with my uncle Ingolfur. While she was there, the Turk pirates attacked, and there was a battle. It was an unexpected attack, most townsfolk escaped, but some stayed and defended the village. My mother, her brother, and my cousin Gunnir were killed. The pirate *bastards* made off with more than a dozen poor souls to suffer an unknown fate.

“My cousin Ketill is Magni there now. His brother Sveinn went to Denmark to join their navy. My mother is buried in Grindavik at the churchyard there, as it was too far to bring her here. Father attended the grave every year for ten years on my mother's

birthday. The Southerners still remember the Turks. They made a law that a Turk can be killed on sight! I was only a small boy on our farm in Reykholt with my father, helping with the sheep. It took two weeks for us to even hear what happened..." he trailed off.

"What was it like? When you were five, and such a terrible..."

"I was stricken with grief. Father paid a neighbour to tend to the sheep so we could travel to the funeral. I remember the place quite well, my cousin Sveinn was disturbed by it...a pirate had grabbed him, and was dragging him towards the small boats when a man named Hjalmar threw an axe the distance of the length of father's house, buried in the side of his skull. He ran over and took Sveinn to safety. The pirate was Dutch, probably a former slave of the Turks himself. Sveinn told me he: "Remembered the pirate twitching on the ground. His body was later burned. Some of us pissed on his ashes-that is why Sveinn joined the navy."

"Thank God Hjalmar was there!" said Erika.

"He is very old now, but he is seen as a hero in the town. There was a reverend from the Westman Islands who was captured named Olafur Egilsson. He has passed by now but he was sent by the Turks to the Danish Court to ask the King to ransom

his people. In the end, only fifty of the four-hundred abductees were returned because the King didn't have much money left after his war. He wrote about his journey. The Church has a copy you should read when we are home."

"Did your mother have any songs?"

"I only remember one, or part of one. She would sing the whole thing, but I was young when she died. Hmm, let me think..." Harold began to sing, and a warm summer breeze muffled his tune.

"Odin ruled over the Asa nation,
Stúma gave sound and station,
the king gave victory and steeple,
To take care of all the people.

Fjölnis thought the journey
stress,
wonder at feats prowess;
Pór took from them all the art,
the one who is fetched from
home did start.

All here feared the great Yggir,
he consumed vast moats of beer,
Silently he fled this land,
when he took Mjollni in hand.

Loki was called the Thin Slave,
lack of vigor but not a knave;
wherever Björn then went to
settle,
surprised he was by Loki's mettle.

Pór then took to Nálar's views;
Of undue harms did he imbue;
I called your name, that was true,
next meeting, my friend, adieu!

Let not wealth dictate
—bastards all of us, there's no
debate —,
Fjöltnis' servant goes with me,
Under the limbs of the Yggdrasil
tree.”

“I think that's all I remember.
Her singing was much nicer than
mine,” said Harold.

“That was interesting but seems
like less a song than it is a story,”
said Erika.

“Most songs are stories,” said
Harold, “and it isn't difficult to
turn a story into a song. I am just
not a great singer. What I
remember is only because I
remember the story. They go
together. Maybe someday you
will write a story, as a song, so
you can remember it.”

Erika thought that was a good
idea, though she kept that to
herself. She laid back and let
herself fall asleep in the comfort
of her furs, back sack, and warm
woollen garments. The warm
wind continued to blow, and the
familiar whistling soothed her to
sleep...

Erika was awakened by her
brother and a strange man in
quiet conversation. She
pretended to remain asleep.

“Yes, the pilgrimage is to
Vidgelmir Cave. I will go there
and pray for a week, only leaving
to get water. It is a very cleansing
experience,” said the stranger.

“I have been there many times,
Thorgil. It is safe; only dangerous
for sheep and the clumsy,” said
Harold.

“Follow this path, it will lead off
along the creek. When the creek
forks, go to your left, north, and
follow that creek. It will divide
once again but don't turn right,
stay northwards. You will come
to a crossing, you will need to
ford the creek. It is pretty low so
you can probably hop across the
rocks if you are sure footed.
Follow that path north until it
turns east, then go east and you
will be headed straight for the
cave. Look for a rock cairn, and
you will be there,” Harold told
this ‘Thorgil’. Erika decided to
stir.

“Look who is up,” said Harold.
“Thorgil, this is my half-sister
Erika. Say hello Erika.”

“Hails, Thorgil,” said Erika

“Blessed be,” said Thorgil, “I
thought you would sleep
through.”

“I suppose not,” said Erika.
“Where are you from?”

“I hail from Skalholt, I was
sponsored for a pilgrimage by
the bishop. I am going to
Vidgelmir cave,” said Thorgil.

“You have come far,” said Harold.
“How long have you been
travelling?”

“I have been taking my time... nearly two months now, much of my travels have been by foot. I have travelled through Thingvellir where I spoke to the people there about the ancestors who would meet there during the heathen times. Then down to Reykjavik, where I spoke to the traders and observed the women trudging their way to Laugardalur with the washing. Like a never-ending parade, they do it. It is amazing to see! Then I booked a passage to Borgarnes and have travelled by foot from there since. Thankfully it was easy to find Reykholt. This is quite a famous place, the home of Snorri Sturleson no less.”

“Yes,” Harold pointed to Erika, “she is a direct descendant of Snorri, through her mother.”

“Wow! Very nice to meet you then! A real-life Sturlung!” said Thorgil.

“Thank you...” said a somewhat confused Erika. It was not as though she ever met him.

“But anyways, I must continue my journey. I will come to see you when I pass through Reykholt. I will look for Harold’s farm!”

“You should look for Olafur’s farmstead, it is a large one and I am also there, he is our father, but I have my own home there too. It is a family farm.”

“Very well, safe journey, Christian.”

“As to you, Christian.”

And with that, Thorgil set on his way. Harold and Erika also soon set out for the mountain meadows further up the valley.

In the meadows, they quickly came across different sorts of flowers and herbs. They encountered many Holurt flowers, making sure to move around and not disturb the delicate patches so they have some in the future. They spent several hours like this, with the sun hardly moving across the sky.

They soon became tired and set up a rest camp as the sun lowered in the sky. Soon it was twilight and so they took their rest. They awoke to the sun beaming down upon them several hours later. Erika took a drink from her waterskin, and so they packed their camp up and started to make their way down the valley and back home. They were carrying less weight now, having eaten most of their food by this time.

They followed the creek and soon came upon the first farm at Reykholt. A dark cloud was following them down the valley, and by the time they got to Olafur’s farm, it started to rain. Thunder roared in the distance.
To be continued...

The Little Brawl at Allen

An Irish Fairy Tale



Chapter 1

“I think,” said Cairell Whiteskin, “that although judgement was given against Fionn, it was Fionn had the rights of it.”

“He had eleven hundred killed,” said Cona’n amiably, “and you may call that the rights of it if you like.”

“All the same—” Cairell began argumentatively.

“And it was you that commenced it,” Cona’n continued.

“Ho! Ho!” Cairell cried. “Why, you are as much to blame as I am.”

“No,” said Cona’n, “for you hit me first.”

“And if we had not been separated—” the other growled.

“Separated!” said Cona’n, with a grin that made his beard poke all around his face.

“Yes, separated. If they had not come between us I still think—”

“Don’t think out loud, dear heart, for you and I are at peace by law.”

“That is true,” said Cairell, “and a man must stick by a judgement. Come with me, my dear, and let us see how the youngsters are shaping in the school. One of them has rather a way with him as a swordsman.”

“No youngster is any good with a sword,” Conan replied.

“You are right there,” said Cairell. “It takes a good ripe man for that weapon.”

“Boys are good enough with slings,” Confro continued, “but except for eating their fill and running away from a fight, you can’t count on boys.”

The two bulky men turned towards the school of the Fianna.

It happened that Fionn mac Uail had summoned the gentlemen of the Fianna and their wives to a banquet. Everybody came, for a banquet given by Fionn was not a thing to be missed. There was Goll mor mac Morna and his people; Fionn’s son Oisi’n and his grandson Oscar. There was Dermod of the Gay Face, Caelte mac Ronan—but indeed there were too many to be told of, for all the pillars of war and battle-torches of the Gael were there.

The banquet began.

Fionn sat in the Chief Captain’s seat in the middle of the fort; and facing him, in the place of honour, he placed the mirthful Goll mac Morna; and from these, ranging on either side, the nobles of the Fianna took each the place that fitted his degree and patrimony.

After good eating, good conversation; and after good conversation, sleep—that is the order of a banquet: so when each person had been served with food to the limit of desire the butlers carried in shining, and jewelled drinking-horns, each

having its tide of smooth, heady liquor. Then the young heroes grew merry and audacious, the ladies became gentle and kind, and the poets became wonders of knowledge and prophecy. Every eye beamed in that assembly, and on Fionn every eye was turned continually in the hope of a glance from the great, mild hero.

Goll spoke to him across the table enthusiastically.

“There is nothing wanting to this banquet, O Chief,” said he.

And Fionn smiled back into that eye which seemed a well of tenderness and friendship.

“Nothing is wanting,” he replied, “but a well-shaped poem.” A crier stood up then, holding in one hand a length of coarse iron links and in the other a chain of delicate, antique silver. He shook the iron chain so that the servants and followers of the household should be silent, and he shook the silver one so that the nobles and poets should hearken also.

Fergus, called True-Lips, the poet of the Fianna-Finn, then sang of Fionn and his ancestors and their deeds. When he had finished Fionn and Oisi’n and Oscar and mac Lugac of the Terrible Hand gave him rare and costly presents, so that every person wondered at their munificence, and even the poet, accustomed to the liberality of kings and princes, was astonished at his gifts.

Fergus then turned to the side of Goll mac Morna, and he sang of the Forts, the Destructions, the Raids, and the Wooings of clann-Morna; and as the poems succeeded each other, Goll grew more and more jovial and contented. When the songs were finished Goll turned in his seat.

“Where is my runner?” he cried.

He had a woman runner, a marvel for swiftness and trust. She stepped forward.

“I am here, royal captain.”

“Have you collected my tribute from Denmark?”

“It is here.”

And, with help, she laid beside him the load of three men of doubly refined gold. Out of this treasure, and from the treasure of rings and bracelets and torques that were with him, Goll mac Morna paid Fergus for his songs, and, much as Fionn had given, Goll gave twice as much.

But, as the banquet proceeded, Goll gave, whether it was to harpers or prophets or jugglers, more than any one else gave, so that Fionn became displeased, and as the banquet proceeded he grew stern and silent.

Chapter 2

[This version of the death of Uail is not correct. Also Cnocha is not in Lochlann but in Ireland.]

The wonderful gift-giving of Goll continued, and an uneasiness and embarrassment

began to creep through the great banqueting hall.

Gentlemen looked at each other questioningly, and then spoke again on indifferent matters, but only with half of their minds. The singers, the harpers, and jugglers submitted to that constraint, so that every person felt awkward and no one knew what should be done or what would happen, and from that doubt dulness came, with silence following on its heels.

There is nothing more terrible than silence. Shame grows in that blank, or anger gathers there, and we must choose which of these is to be our master.

That choice lay before Fionn, who never knew shame.

“Goll,” said he, “how long have you been taking tribute from the people of Lochlann?”

“A long time now,” said Goll.

And he looked into an eye that was stern and unfriendly.

“I thought that my rent was the only one those people had to pay,” Fionn continued.

“Your memory is at fault,” said Goll.

“Let it be so,” said Fionn. “How did your tribute arise?”

“Long ago, Fionn, in the days when your father forced war on me.”

“Ah!” said Fionn.

“When he raised the High King against me and banished me from Ireland.”

“Continue,” said Fionn, and he held Goll’s eye under the great beetle of his brow.

“I went into Britain,” said Goll, “and your father followed me there. I went into White Lochlann (Norway) and took it. Your father banished me thence also.”

“I know it,” said Fionn.

“I went into the land of the Saxons and your father chased me out of that land. And then, in Lochlann, at the battle of Cnocha your father and I met at last, foot to foot, eye to eye, and there, Fionn!”

“And there, Goll?”

“And there I killed your father.”

Fionn sat rigid and unmoving, his face stony and terrible as the face of a monument carved on the side of a cliff.

“Tell all your tale,” said he.

“At that battle I beat the Lochlannachs. I penetrated to the hold of the Danish king, and I took out of his dungeon the men who had lain there for a year and were awaiting their deaths. I liberated fifteen prisoners, and one of them was Fionn.”

“It is true,” said Fionn.

Goll’s anger fled at the word.

“Do not be jealous of me, dear heart, for if I had twice the tribute I would give it to you and to Ireland.”

But at the word jealous the Chief’s anger revived.

“It is an impertinence,” he cried, “to boast at this table that you killed my father.”

“By my hand,” Goll replied, “if Fionn were to treat me as his father did I would treat Fionn the way I treated Fionn’s father.”

Fionn closed his eyes and beat away the anger that was rising within him. He smiled grimly.

“If I were so minded, I would not let that last word go with you, Goll, for I have here an hundred men for every man of yours.”

Goll laughed aloud.

“So had your father,” he said.

Fionn’s brother, Cairell Whiteskin, broke into the conversation with a harsh laugh.

“How many of Fionn’s household has the wonderful Goll put down?” he cried.

But Goll’s brother, bald Cona’n the Swearer, turned a savage eye on Cairell.

“By my weapons,” said he, “there were never less than an hundred-and-one men with Goll, and the least of them could have put you down easily enough.”

“Ah?” cried Cairell. “And are you one of the hundred-and-one, old scaldhead?”

“One indeed, my thick-witted, thin-livered Cairell, and I undertake to prove on your hide that what my brother said was true and that what your brother said was false.”

“You undertake that,” growled Cairell, and on the word he loosed a furious buffet at Con’an, which Cona’n returned with a fist so big that every part of Cairell’s face was hit with the one blow.

The two then fell into grips, and went lurching and punching about the great hall. Two of Oscar’s sons could not bear to see their uncle being worsted, and they leaped at Cona’n, and two of Goll’s sons rushed at them. Then Oscar himself leaped up, and with a hammer in either hand he went battering into the melee.

“I thank the gods,” said Cona’n, “for the chance of killing yourself, Oscar.”

These two encountered then, and Oscar knocked a groan of distress out of Cona’n. He looked appealingly at his brother Art og mac Morna, and that powerful champion flew to his aid and wounded Oscar. Oisi’n, Oscar’s father, could not abide that; he dashed in and quelled Art Og. Then Rough Hair mac Morna wounded Oisin and was himself tumbled by mac Lugac, who was again wounded by Gara mac Morna.

The banqueting hall was in tumult. In every part of it men were giving and taking blows. Here two champions with their arms round each other’s necks were stamping round and round in a slow, sad dance. Here were two crouching against each other, looking for a soft place to hit. Yonder a big-shouldered person lifted another man in his arms and threw him at a small group that charged him. In a retired corner a gentleman stood in a thoughtful attitude while he tried to pull out a tooth that had been knocked loose.

“You can’t fight,” he mumbled, “with a loose shoe or a loose tooth.”

“Hurry up with that tooth,” the man in front of him grum-bled, “for I want to knock out another one.”

Pressed against the wall was a bevy of ladies, some of whom were screaming and some laughing and all of whom were calling on the men to go back to their seats.

Only two people remained seated in the hall.

Goll sat twisted round watching the progress of the brawl critically, and Fionn, sitting opposite, watched Goll.

Just then Faelan, another of Fionn’s sons, stormed the hall with three hundred of the Fianna, and by this force all Goll’s people were put out of doors, where the fight continued.

Goll looked then calmly on Fionn.

“Your people are using their weapons,” said he.

“Are they?” Fionn inquired as calmly, and as though addressing the air.

“In the matter of weapons—!” said Goll.

And the hard-fighting pillar of battle turned to where his arms hung on the wall behind him. He took his solid, well-balanced sword in his fist, over his left arm his ample, bossy shield, and, with another side-look at Fionn, he left the hall and charged irresistibly into the fray.

Fionn then arose. He took his accoutrements from the wall also and strode out. Then he raised the triumphant Fenian shout and went into the combat.

That was no place for a sick person to be. It was not the corner which a slender-fingered woman would choose to do up her hair; nor was it the spot an ancient man would select to think quietly in, for the tumult of sword on sword, of axe on shield, the roar of the contending parties, the crying of wounded men, and the screaming of frightened women destroyed peace, and over all was the rallying cry of Goll mac Morna and the great shout of Fionn.

Then Fergus True-Lips gathered about him all the poets of the Fianna, and they surrounded the combatants. They began to chant and intone long, heavy rhymes and incantations, until the rhythmic beating of their voices covered even the noise of war, so that the men stopped hacking and hewing, and let their weapons drop from their hands. These were picked up by the poets and a reconciliation was effected between the two parties.

But Fionn affirmed that he would make no peace with clann-Morna until the matter had been judged by the king, Cormac mac Art, and by his daughter Ailve, and by his son Cairbre of Ana Life’ and by Fintan the chief poet. Goll agreed that the affair should be submitted to that court, and a day was appointed, a fortnight

from that date, to meet at Tara of the Kings for judgement. Then the hall was cleansed and the banquet recommenced.

Of Fionn's people eleven hundred of men and women were dead, while of Goll's people eleven men and fifty women were dead. But it was through fright the women died, for not one of them had a wound or a bruise or a mark.

Chapter 3

AT the end of a fortnight Fionn and Goll and the chief men of the Fianna attended at Tara. The king, his son and daughter, with Flahri, Feehal, and Fintan mac Bocna sat in the place of judgement, and Cormac called on the witnesses for evidence.

Fionn stood up, but the moment he did so Goll mac Morna arose also.

"I object to Fionn giving evidence," said he.

"Why so?" the king asked.

"Because in any matter that concerned me Fionn would turn a lie into truth and the truth into a lie."

"I do not think that is so," said Fionn.

"You see, he has already commenced it," cried Goll.

"If you object to the testimony of the chief person present, in what way are we to obtain evidence?" the king demanded.

"I," said Goll, "will trust to the evidence of Fergus True-Lips. He

is Fionn's poet, and will tell no lie against his master; he is a poet, and will tell no lie against any one."

"I agree to that," said Fionn.

"I require, nevertheless," Goll continued, "that Fergus should swear before the Court, by his gods, that he will do justice between us."

Fergus was accordingly sworn, and gave his evidence. He stated that Fionn's brother Cairell struck Cona'n mac Morna, that Goll's two sons came to help Cona'n, that Oscar went to help Cairell, and with that Fionn's people and the clann-Morna rose at each other, and what had started as a brawl ended as a battle with eleven hundred of Fionn's people and sixty-one of Goll's people dead.

"I marvel," said the king in a discontented voice, "that, considering the numbers against them, the losses of clann-Morna should be so small."

Fionn blushed when he heard that.

Fergus replied:

"Goll mac Morna covered his people with his shield. All that slaughter was done by him."

"The press was too great," Fionn grumbled. "I could not get at him in time or—"

"Or what?" said Goll with a great laugh.

Fionn shook his head sternly and said no more.

“What is your judgement?” Cormac demanded of his fellow-judges.

Flahri pronounced first.

“I give damages to clann-Morna.”

“Why?” said Cormac.

“Because they were attacked first.”

Cormac looked at him stubbornly.

“I do not agree with your judgement,” he said.

“What is there faulty in it?” Flahri asked.

“You have not considered,” the king replied, “that a soldier owes obedience to his captain, and that, given the time and the place, Fionn was the captain and Goll was only a simple soldier.”

Flahri considered the king’s suggestion.

“That,” he said, “would hold good for the white-striking or blows of fists, but not for the red-striking or sword-strokes.”

“What is your judgement?” the king asked Feehal. Feehal then pronounced:

“I hold that clann-Morna were attacked first, and that they are to be free from payment of damages.”

“And as regards Fionn?” said Cormac.

“I hold that on account of his great losses Fionn is to be exempt from payment of damages, and that his losses are to be considered as damages.”

“I agree in that judgement,” said Fintan.

The king and his son also agreed, and the decision was imparted to the Fianna.

“One must abide by a judgement,” said Fionn.

“Do you abide by it?” Goll demanded.

“I do,” said Fionn.

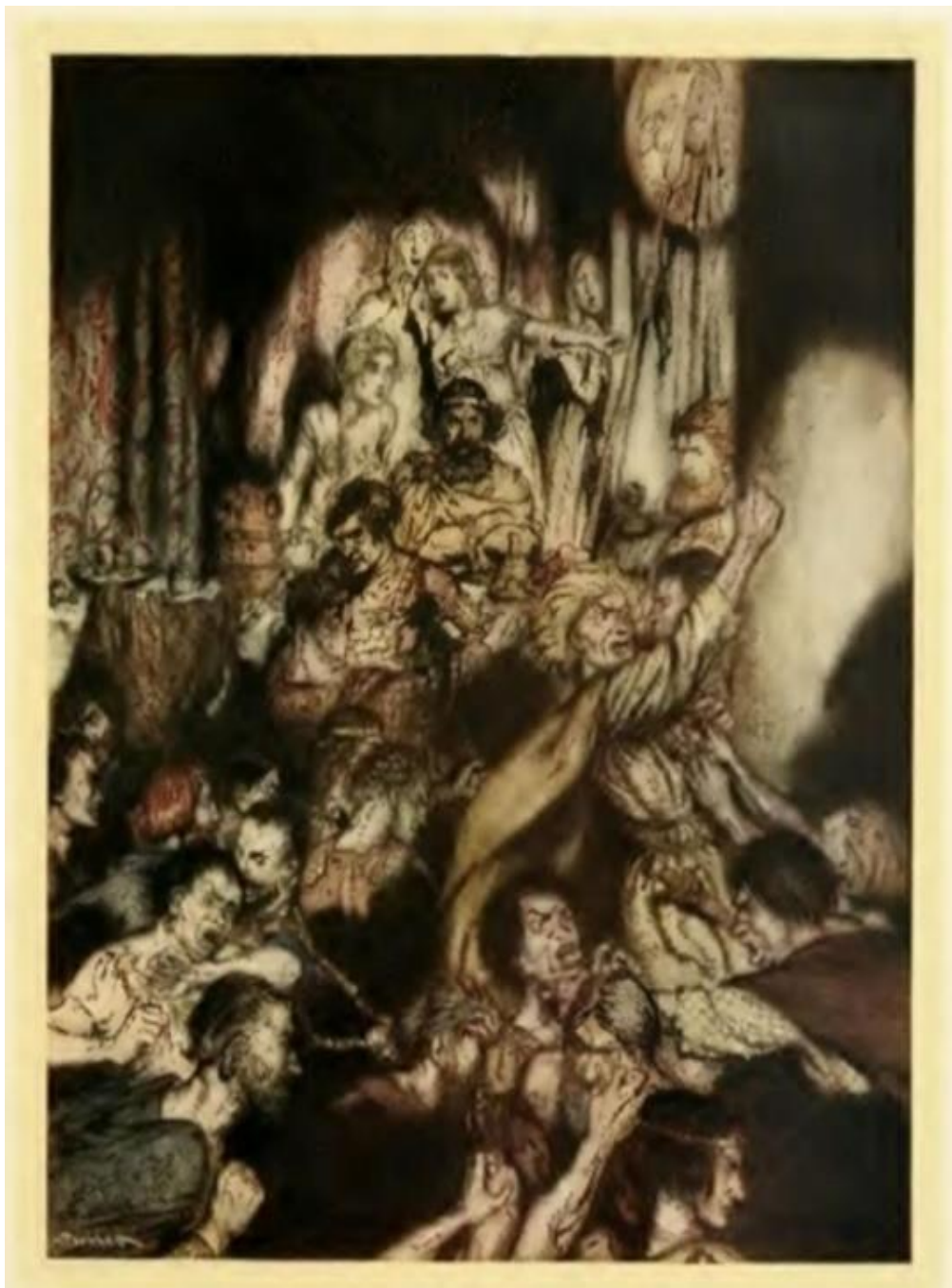
Goll and Fionn then kissed each other, and thus peace was made. For, notwithstanding the endless bicker of these two heroes, they loved each other well.

Yet, now that the years have gone by, I think the fault lay with Goll and not with Fionn, and that the judgement given did not consider everything. For at that table Goll should not have given greater gifts than his master and host did. And it was not right of Goll to take by force the position of greatest gift-giver of the Fianna, for there was never in the world one greater at giving gifts, or giving battle, or making poems than Fionn was.

That side of the affair was not brought before the Court. But perhaps it was suppressed out of delicacy for Fionn, for if Goll could be accused of ostentation, Fionn was open to the uglier charge of jealousy. It was, nevertheless, Goll’s forward and impish temper which commenced the brawl, and the verdict of time must be to exonerate Fionn and to let the blame go where it is merited.

There is, however, this to be added and remembered, that whenever Fionn was in a tight corner it was Goll that plucked him out of it; and, later on, when time did his worst on them all and the Fianna were sent to hell as unbelievers, it was Goll mac Morna who assaulted hell, with a

chain in his great fist and three iron balls swinging from it, and it was he who attacked the hosts of great devils and brought Fionn and the Fianna-Finn out with him.



Druid

Without a Home

Chapter 1
Saved By a Dragon

Call of the Shieldmaiden



PRELUDE: The heavily forested foothills of the Eithne Mountains seemed as dark and gloomy as Degore's soul. The ancient ridge stretched out before him for many miles; its low height, compared to the mountains back east, detailed the centuries of erosion that had taken their toll. The path up ahead disappeared around a bend, and the foliage of the myriad of trees and shrubbery invaded the sides of the path, threatening to swallow him up and keep him there forever.

Despite his years of travel, he felt out of breath and ready to collapse. His mind played over the events leading up to his ascent: the panting, wounded farm hand who collapsed onto the pub floor on the eve of his departure from the City of Roses. The young man had garbled out a story of death and destruction before producing a letter. Degore wished he had never seen it. Crisp white paper, stained with sweat on the outside, and the words on the inside... Degore shuddered again, his hand absently feeling the inner pocket of his leather satchel. The letter requested, nay ordered, his help in doing dark deeds.

What horrors lay ahead in the little thatched roof pub, he wondered. He would have to be close now, as no farmer wanted to go mountain climbing just to get a beer. Degore gripped his pendant. It had been with him for many years, a reminder of

courage in the face of what seemed like the end of the world. With his other hand he touched the hilt of his sword. The ancient blade had been well used by druids for many generations and served its master well. While a good druid took pride in how infrequently he used his sword, he always had one just in case.

As he left the scrub and tree-specked landscape, which was punctuated here and there by a humble farmstead, he began to enter the trees but was unsettled by the shouting and bellowing he heard up ahead. A family of doves burst suddenly from a bush, startled by the voices that boomed out loudly in the quiet of the forest. Degore jumped.

He stopped. It was so tempting to just retrace his steps and be gone from this cursed place forever. It was not suitable for him, a young druid of the forest far away to the east, to be fighting a battle on someone else's mountain. But he knew he could not live with himself if he ran away, so he pressed on. He knew deep down inside that the author of the letter was puffing up his power and influence. The letter was addressed to him; this made it personal.

"I see you have come," the friendly voice at his elbow startled him and his blood ran cold.

“Emeric,” Degore tried to sound enthused and untroubled. The man who had dogged his steps since his youth was right beside him. His mind flashed back to the sunny day, many years ago, when they first met. Emeric did not appear to age, and was still in possession of the charm and charisma of an experienced king’s advisor, despite only being five years the elder. He had been on the lookout for an innocent animal to capture then, and had now moved on to whole settlements of humble farming folk. Degore felt the years of non-confrontational dealings with Emeric welling up in a strong desire to slap him across the face.

Emeric smirked and ran his hand over his plastered back hair. His - likely stolen - fine linen shirt clung to his masculine frame, and the stubble on his chin showed the distraction from his usual fastidious grooming.

“Welcome to my abode.” Emeric waved his hand forwards. “Come, my friend, we have much to discuss.”

Degore swished his robe away from touching the man and the two moved forwards together.

“The farms you noticed on the way here are all in my control now.” Emeric patted the hilt of his sword. “And I hope your arrival indicates you are ready to help me maintain control now

that I have pacified the natives. You did get my letter?”

Degore felt revulsion. He opened his mouth to speak, but Emeric continued.

“I know you are a humble druid, sworn to God and peace and all that. But there is so much more out there in the world than visiting musty abbeys and gathering parchments.” Emeric surveyed his companion’s humble, woollen robes. “You would look better in finer clothes my man. I have great plans for both of us.”

Degore studied Emeric for a brief second. The silver bracelets on his wrists, now washed of their victims’ blood, barely covered the scar that began on his hand and disappeared under the cuff of his shirt sleeve. Degore had always wondered how he had gotten it, but knew the answer would likely be a lie, so he never bothered to ask.

The thatched pub was before them, and Halfdan awaited outside the door, as merry as ever. He was a jovial and cruel man, whose pleasant blue eyes could turn from warm to cold in a split second, with shaggy ginger brown hair that gave him a roguish air. A few horses were tied nearby, blood splattered over their tack. Beautiful tack it was too, with patterns burnt into the leather and embroidered saddle blankets.

The inside of the pub was bright, and would have been cheerful just a week or so ago, with the humble wooden furniture sturdy and shining with a gentle patina of years of use, before Emeric and his men showed up. The three bastards as they were known, though all were rumoured to have come from good homes (there was evidence to the contrary for at least one of them). Now they filled the place with an ominous air. Gone were the jaunty tunes of the tin whistle and the lute, the laughter of hardworking men and women, and the gentle snorts of their munching horses waiting to depart late into the night.

Brand was behind the bar. "Good sirs, how can I serve you?" Despite his affinity for blood and death, he was a very well-spoken man. His trousers were of soft calfskin and revealed the powerful legs beneath. The manliness of the legs matched his strong jaw and defined brows. Degore had come across very few rumours of him; most simply referred to the son of a king, doing dark deeds in the shadows. Try as he might though, Degore had found no evidence that his background was anything other than that of a stable hand born to a drunkard father.

"Give us a pint, mate." Emeric sat down and motioned to Degore to do the same. He did so with reluctance, but declined the offered tankard.

Emeric eyed him. "You are up to something."

Degore sighed and his hand absently felt his mother's pendant around his neck. "I have not come to do your bidding."

"And why not?" Emeric demanded politely. "You are turning down a great opportunity."

"I am not going to partake in stealing from the farmers." Degore raised his eyes with no small effort to look into Emeric's. "I will not be party to your killing and maiming in order to get your way."

Emeric sighed and set down his pint. "You have been a goody two shoes since I met you. Always doing the right thing." The last sentence was spoken in mockery. "We only have one life on this earth, let's live it to the full."

"Whatever draw you have towards me, I do not want it." Degore slowly rose up from his chair. "For so long have I turned the other cheek and gone my own way in the face of your evil, but no more." he moved towards Emeric, who shrunk back as Degore's solid frame loomed over him. "This ends here. You have come to a tiny farming village on the other side of the world to kill, and steal, and it ends here." Degore was now before the other man. "From this moment, I will be pursuing you. And I will not rest until you are

defeated!” Degore reached out to seize Emeric by the collar.

All went dark.

Emeric and Halfdan stood looking down at Degore’s unconscious body, crumpled on the floor. His dark hair, matted at the back, began to redden and fresh blood began to drip onto the floor. A part of his cape covered his lower face, disguising his shallow breaths. Brand set down the rock.

“Well, hopefully that’s him dead and off our hands.” Halfdan offered. Killing was easy for him, having at least twenty dead men on his hands, and, it was rumoured, children too.

Emeric felt strangely irritable. “There was no need to kill him just yet!”

“But you heard him threatening to hunt you forever!” Brand exclaimed. “You know he is capable of so much more than he realises.”

“That’s what we keep telling him,” Halfdan chuckled.

“But seriously, if this man were not dead right now, he would become someone important in the future. I wonder where he was born and raised.” Emeric forced down his irritation and gave a harsh laugh. “Put his body behind the bar or something, we have farmers coming soon to pay us fealty.”

The jolts of movement roused Degore slightly and he

watched through half closed eyes as his pendant dragged along the floor beside him. Slowly he faded away again, and his mind flew back to his first memory of the pendant.

Many years earlier, in the thick forest to the east, our story begins:

His chest tightened and he looked around frantically. The snarling of wolves somewhere behind him in the trees made his heart thump in his chest. Swiping the blur from his eyes with the back of his hands, Degore jumped up from where he was crouched. The bushes rustled ominously and he looked with despair at the cold, lifeless body of his mother. Despite being a mere five years old he seemed to be aware that she would not be coming with him. He grabbed the broken pendant from her bruised throat. An enormous grey muzzle slowly came out of the gloom in front of him. The mouth slowly twisted into a snarl and the sharp white teeth glistened in what little light filtered through the thick trees.

Degore gasped and shrunk back, but a low, barely audible growl from behind him made him freeze. He turned slowly and saw a giant grey wolf standing out in the open. It looked pitilessly down on him with its slanted yellow eyes. With one last despairing glance at his mother’s body he turned and ran. He ran frantically for a minute, not

knowing where he was going. He glanced behind him and stumbled, for the ground in front of him was starting to rise. Degore lurched forwards but caught himself, the distraction halted his frantic running and he looked around for evil grey mouths. All was deathly silent. He looked around at the tall trees stretching out of sight above his head and the thick undergrowth blocking his view. He burst into tears. He sobbed bitterly for a few minutes, but the tears slowed. He glanced around him and the dense trees seemed to be moving in closer on him. He hurried forwards, but it was difficult with large stones spread across the ground. He came across a thin path that wound its way upwards and he followed it.

Degore stumbled his way to the top of a hill. His tear-streaked face glinted in the rays of light that flickered down through the trees. The hill rose from amongst the trees and as he emerged above the tree line the air changed. Gone were the earthy scent and filtered sunlight and in their place was the bright sunlight and a gentle breeze. On a good day, one of his favourite animals, the dragon, might be seen gliding along the horizon. Birds dipped in and out of the treetops and a butterfly momentarily flitted around his head. In another life he would have been thrilled and exclaimed about it all to his mother, but that would never happen.

From the top of the hill, he looked about. He cried out and shrunk behind a bush. An enormous green dragon lay across the open space on the top of the hill. Her face was clearly visible. 'A dragon!' he thought, 'Don't they eat people?' He looked back, at the dark trees still hiding angry grey mouths of the wolves. The dragon was sleeping, but he knew not for how long. He could sneak past her. He crept forward slowly. The dragon did not move. After going a few paces, he worried that thick forest and more wolves would be on the other side.

Ahead, the hill dropped sharply away into a cliff. Cautiously he approached the edge and looked down on the sleepy town that lay at its base. A few signs of the recent raid were still visible, the raid that he and his mother were trying to escape from, but which had followed them. He saw a burnt thatch roof here and the body of an unfortunate person there. To the watching eyes he appeared to be in a daze.

A small splashing sound came from behind him and a squeaky voice sounded: "Yeeeeee!" Something wet hit the back of his neck.

Degore turned as he felt his neck. He looked down at his hand to see mud on it. Before him a



baby dragon stood knee deep in a mud puddle. It wiped some mud off its nose and coughed, a small flash of flame appeared for just a second. The little dragon squeaked in surprise. It was no bigger than he was, and mud now coated its lower body and twitching tail. The soft green scales were the colour of new grass and it had eager brown eyes. Degore was a bit surprised, as he had been warned of the cold and uncaring eyes of dragons.

The dragon looked at him. "Hi, do you like mud? I like mud!"

The big dragon sighed in her sleep and Degore reached over to hold the baby dragon's mouth shut. "Shh," he whispered, "there is a big dragon just behind you."

The little dragon's eyes began to crinkle up and he pulled weakly at the hands that held his mouth shut.

Degore let go. "We must be quiet!"

The little dragon nodded in confusion. "Okay," he said, "am I too loud for your human ears?" He began to hop up and down in the puddle. "Do you like mud?"

Degore nodded "Yes, but my mother does not like it when I play in the mud."

The baby dragon giggled. "Mothers are like that; this is

mine here." He gestured behind himself.

The big dragon lying in the centre of the hilltop still had her eyes closed, but it was easy to tell she was not sleeping anymore. She had the same green scales as the baby dragon but the edges were tinged with silver. She glowed in the sun. Degore estimated she would just be able to fit into a thatched roofed cottage if its roof was removed, and her tail wrapped around her.

"My mother is dead." Degore burst into tears, stifling his sobs.

At the sight, the baby dragon's eyes widened. He rushed from the puddle, spraying mud everywhere, put a wing around Degore, and snuggled their little faces together. Degore could feel a little bit of warmth radiating from his chest. In time, Degore's tears stopped. The little dragon looked at him intently. "You can come and live with us!" he exclaimed. "My name is Dragos. Who are you?"

Degore sniffed and wiped his hand across his nose. "I am Degore."

Dragos flapped his wings and jumped up and down, but at that moment the mother dragon opened her eyes and swung her head over. "The dens of dragons are no place for a small human." She announced. "You say your mother is dead? Well, I will bring

you to some people who will care for you.”

Her voice had a harsh tinge to it, but the practical way she spoke reminded Degore of his mother just that morning as she reassured him that moving on to the next town would finally bring them peace. He burst into tears again.

The dragon scooped up the two in her big hands and held them gently but firmly. With her other three legs she lunged herself off the hill and they were airborne. For a second Degore felt scared and the wind drew tears to his eyes, but the strong hands beneath him made him feel safe and he noticed how thrilled his companion was.



Shouts came from the village below but they soon faded as the dragon flew ahead at great speed. For just a moment, Degore forgot all else, he was flying! The little dragon snuggled up beside him and the two clutched onto the big dragon's hands with their little ones and surveyed the forest. The great wings beat above them. Every now and again there was a

break in the trees and they pointed things out to each other, an extra scraggly bush or a lone deer. It was an exhilarating ride for a few hours but then Degore grew sleepy, his mind returned to the dark forest, and he grew quiet. The little dragon was struggling to keep his eyes open, and he put his wings around Degore. After flying for an hour or two, the mother dragon looked down and saw them napping together.

The first streaks of morning light were warming the air as a movement woke Degore. He was no longer moving and he was being held by something warm. He lifted his sleepy head. A tall, sturdy man was holding him and gazing out into the distance. Degore rubbed his eyes and saw the mother dragon flying away towards the dark mountains that stretched far into the west.

The man looked back at Degore. “The dragons like you,” he said, “What is your name?”

“I am Degore.” He looked sadly at the man. The excitement of the trip had worn off, and the memory of his mother lying unresponsive and cold in the forest many miles away came back to him. Moreover, he was hungry and cold.

“This is the Abbey, and you will be taken care of now,” said the man. “The dragon told me about your mother.”

Degore nodded. Footsteps could be heard and a woman's voice said "Wrap the wee lad in this, he must be cold."

The woman had a pleasant, motherly air, and long dark tresses. She smiled at him. "So you have come to live with us?" she asked. "I am glad of it. I am Freyja, I will get you some food and a nice warm bath." She held the ends of the pendant chain that hung out of the sides of Degore's hand. "Is this your mother's?" she asked kindly.

Degore nodded. He glanced around him. Behind rose a massive building, with large windows filled with colourful glass. The symbol of his pendant matched the symbol that stood tall and proud on the steep roof. Around this huge building were nestled cute stone cottages, overgrown in climbing roses and vines, and the usual thatched roof cottages that were everywhere he went. Huge trees and large gardens surrounded the little village, and beyond that fluffy sheep were slowly being driven back towards the folds.

Gently Freyja took the chain, and, tying a knot in the back to make it smaller, she hung it around Degore's neck and tucked it under his shirt.

She looked questioningly at the man. "He is an orphan, dear," he said, then, holding Degore in one arm, and placing the other around his wife, they set off for

the collection of stone buildings that stood surrounded by ancient trees. They passed through a shadow thrown by the magnificent cathedral and went into a humble stone cottage that nestled at its base.

Degore was bathed and given food. Then he sat beside Freyja, as she cut the ends off beans in the courtyard.

"Where am I?" Degore asked.

"You are at the Abbey of St Carella." Freyja looked at him, "Were you ever brought to an Abbey or Cathedral before?"

Degore shook his head, he pulled out his mother's pendant. "Mother said she got this when I was born from the priest in our town, and said one day I would make a pilgrimage to his Abbey, but I don't remember the name of the saint."

Freyja ran her eyes over the sad little boy holding out the pendant to her. It was round, with three raised circles, one slightly larger than the others, set into a triangular formation, in the centre of each was smooth, dull coloured stone. Arranged in the gaps around the edge where the circles bent away were three curved triangular shapes, one showing faint traces of gold.

"If you hold the pendant up with the largest circle at the top you will be able to see the symbols of the nine saints."

Freyja gently helped him take off the pendant so he could hold it up before him. "The big circle is St Elizabeth, the circle on the right St Leo and on the left St Itta, they were three saints who lived full lives in service to the people and to God. The triangle on the right is for St George, on the bottom for St Carella, who lived and died here where we are, and the one on the left is for St Gisela, who is the saint this pendant is dedicated to." she pointed out the faint traces of gold. "These three saints were martyred."

"Why did St Gisela die?" Degore wondered.

"She was a young woman who helped some Druids escape, many centuries ago in the forest, probably somewhere between where the dragon found you and us. She had visions which led to them evading recapture, but she was struck down by an arrow in the escape." Freyja smiled at him. "That is a valuable pendant you have there, your mother would have paid handsomely for it, so keep it safe and under your clothes if not around friends."

"What are the gems for?"

"They are a more recent addition to the pendant. Many years ago, a young man was killed when a place called the White City was invaded. Everyone was impressed by his courage and wanted to make him a saint, so we added two others, St Adelaide, and St Sempill."

"Oh, I know him!" Degore exclaimed "We celebrate him in the spring!"

"Yes," Freyja smiled, "that is right, it seemed after centuries of celebration, it was only right to include him."

Degore grew silent for a time, and Freyja left him to his thoughts.

"Who is he?" Degore suddenly pointed to the tall, sturdy man who was talking to a group of people under some enormous oak trees.

"My husband," Freyja said. "Uhtred the Bold, he is in charge of things around here." She looked kindly at him. "See those children out there?" She pointed out to the fields where half a dozen women were giving directions to about 20 children in a large garden. Some seemed to be happy with their chores, others dragged their feet. "Some of them are like you, taken in by us here at the Abbey. You will grow up with them and be one of us. We are very happy for you to be here and you are safe here with us."

"Why were people attacking each other?" Degore asked, as his mind once again drifted back to the events of the past few days. He looked out through a gap between two cottages to a bunch of children playing amongst some fruit trees. They were trying to leap up and touch the baby apples on high branches.

“At Green Flowers? The place the dragon found you?” Freyja asked “Well, the various kingdoms in the forest have been at war from time to time for centuries. It never seems to end.”

“Will I ever see the dragon again?” asked Degore as he felt his mother’s rosary beads under his shirt.

“You might,” Freyja smiled down at him, “just remember to treat dragons as your equal. Don’t look down on them and do not worship them.”

“I love dragons,” Degore sighed and leaned back against the trunk of a thousand-year-old tree. A tiny tan muzzle sneaked around the tree and gently sniffed his face. He turned to look and a little dog leapt out in front of him. Its tail wagged ferociously and it tried to chew on his shoe. Degore patted the small head and the dog snuggled up to him. All was calm and peaceful here, far away from the war, but the dull ache remained in his heart.



The Good-Morrow

I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den?
'Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love, all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without sharp north, without declining west?
Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.

-JOHN DONNE

