

CORN CRAKE

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ISSUE 2



NESTING IN THE OAK OF
ENGLISH LITERATURE



An impressionist painting of a town, likely by J.M.W. Turner, showing a view from a hillside. The scene is filled with warm, textured brushstrokes in shades of brown, green, and blue, depicting buildings and a landscape. The title 'CONTENTS' and 'ISSUE 2' is overlaid on this image.

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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



It doesn't seem a month since I signed off the proofs of the last issue of *Corncrake* and yet here we are again. Poised to ingest another generous helping of the very choicest morsels that English literature has to offer.

This issue comes with no fewer than seven stories. Our cover star Little Boots features in an original story of the same name, written by Carl Hermann Habermas. Authors of days past are represented by a tenebrous tale by HP Lovecraft, and a one act play by Kenneth Sawyer Goodman: *The Game of Chess*. Yet more new stories are contributed by ND Wallace Swan with the second part of his *Erika Olafsdottir* tale, Goose Howards with *The Old English Town*, and the second instalment of my own modern fantasy epic *Druid Without a Home*.

But alas, fellow English folk, I surely need not remind you of which eve is upon us. We reach the anniversary of the valiant slaying of the dragon by Saint George! Last year, A friend and I were at Uffington White Horse, which spreads across the hillside where the dragon was slain. Morris dancers leapt about as celebrants cheered. The eponymous white horse graced us with its magnificent presence. This year, I hope to capture the spirit of St George's day in the written word. You will be treated to a retelling of such legend, which is sure to have us all contemplating how much St George is, in fact, "literally me".

Happy Reading!

Call of the Shieldmaiden
Editor-in-Chief



The Ass and the Mule
Aesop
Published ~400 BCE

A certain man who had an Ass and a Mule loaded them both up one day and set out upon a journey. So long as the road was fairly level, the Ass got on very well: but by and by they came to a place among the hills where the road was very rough and steep, and the Ass was at his last gasp. So he begged the Mule to relieve him of a part of his load: but the Mule refused. At last, from sheer weariness, the Ass stumbled and fell down a steep place and was killed. The driver was in despair, but he did the best he could: he added the Ass's load to the Mule's, and he also flayed the Ass and put his skin on the top of the double load. The Mule could only just manage the extra weight, and, as he staggered painfully along, he said to himself, "I have only got what I deserved: if I had been willing to help the Ass at first, I should not now be carrying his load and his skin into the bargain."



Little Boots

Carl Hermann Habermas



[Excerpt from 1874 Almanac of Folk Tales in England]

Ensnconced in the rolling hills of Northumbria dwell many a creature both enigmatic and formidable. They vary in size and shape but are invariably capable of capturing the attention of those who willing to learn of the region; From spectral hounds that stalk the treeside, to the perilous cawing of eagles whose gaze of cold command can send shivers through even the most seasoned of travellers. Such creatures one can find honoured in a manner befitting their mythical status in the local drinking houses. The familiar din of merriment one often experiences traversing the cobbled streets outside of such respites will subside, leaving only hushed whispers and hand-puppet shadows in the orange hue of the candlelight. Indeed, such simulations of terror have become a venerable tradition; all children become versed in this folk art. Though interest subsides in one's teenage years, those children once coerced into learning such things by rote grow to find its application in those moments of inebriation where a childlike terror can be found beneath a glass of whiskey.

Maturation to adulthood in such villages has many mediums, but none so common as those produced from youthful folly. The exuberance of adolescence has inspired many a young band

of drinkers to sequester themselves in the solitude of the woods, the revelation of mortality often preceded by jeers at its possibility. The mocking of shadows in the brushes, an image hinted in firelight, and the crunch of twigs underfoot are all followed by a feeling of disquiet masked in the faux-nonchalance of fraternal laughter. That is until such a creature is spotted. Deep cuts from a wolf, the screams of a fox, or the presence of a being much more supernatural have claimed the innocence of many a young man now acquainted with the knowledge of his mortality.

Yet of these creatures, there is one who lies above all others in infamy. One whose dominion lies beyond the woodlands unchallenged. He traipses through these sleepy towns - not even constrained by the cover of night - and those who are struck by his visage dare not challenge his path. Only the innocence of a child can reckon with him, in that they do not know how close to death they come by their encounter with the beast. Of those whom he marks for death, he has not yet met one not desperate to escape their fate through offerings. This beast, as noble as he is awe-inspiring, will grant mercy upon receiving tribute. Often, the rain is its harbinger. The torrential pools that bombard a town will see themselves defiled by the creature, whose footfalls send

tremors into once tranquil waters.

It is worth noting that the recountings of the creature thus far have been autobiographical in nature. Most inhabitants of the village, if they were to hear it, would agree that the description given was far too grandiose an image for a little corncrake. To himself, he fancies its presence too horrific, too omnipotent, too embedded into the nightmarish subconscious to have his essence captured in words. To the locals, however, he is known as “Little Boots”.

This little corncrake, with his eponymous little boots, roams into town bold as brass. It is uncertain how he acquired such minuscule footwear, necessarily fashioned by an artisan unknown, but the frequency of his visits has rendered them an accepted and unremarkable feature. The dark fuzz ball wanders through the town, deftly avoided by the footfalls of the locals such that he does not come to injury, so that he may splash in the puddles.

Upon witnessing such a creature, the young children invariably run to get a closer look. Having become accustomed to the pleading to feed the corncrake that invariably follows, no parent fails to leave the house without having at least one tributary slice

of bread. As such, Little Boots never goes hungry. Wholly taken in by the novelty and cuteness of the corncrake, many a child then learns to create shadow puppets of their collective pet. For those early years he becomes an unceasing and infallible friend for parents to ease their children into bed who, upon growing into adulthood, will often recall their old friend and create such imitative shadows again in the revelry of a drunken stupor.

However, in this little corncrake's mind, the bread was a guarantee: His overlordship and benevolence paid for in tithes of carbohydrates. Truly, he found himself to be fearsome. With each nibble, his steely eye gazed upon his captives, and they had granted themselves mercy from his wrath for another day.



THE GOATHERD AND THE WILD GOATS AESOP

A Goatherd was tending his goats out at pasture when he saw a number of Wild Goats approach and mingle with his flock. At the end of the day he drove them home and put them all into the pen together. Next day the weather was so bad that he could not take them out as usual: so he kept them at home in the pen, and fed them there. He only gave his own goats enough food to keep them from starving, but he gave the Wild Goats as much as they could eat and more; for he was very anxious for them to stay, and he thought that if he fed them well they wouldn't want to leave him. When the weather improved, he took them all out to pasture again; but no sooner had they got near the hills than the Wild Goats broke away from the flock and scampered off. The Goatherd was very much disgusted at this, and roundly abused them for their ingratitude. "Rascals!" he cried, "to run away like that after the way I've treated you!" Hearing this, one of them turned round and said, "Oh, yes, you treated us all right—too well, in fact; it was just that that put us on our guard. If you treat newcomers like ourselves so much better than your own flock, it's more than likely that, if another lot of strange goats joined yours, _we_ should then be neglected in favour of the last comers."



THE WOMAN AND THE FARMER

AESOP

A Woman, who had lately lost her husband, used to go every day to his grave and lament her loss. A Farmer, who was engaged in ploughing not far from the spot, set eyes upon the Woman and desired to have her for his wife: so he left his plough and came and sat by her side, and began to shed tears himself. She asked him why he wept; and he replied, "I have lately lost my wife, who was very dear to me, and tears ease my grief." "And I," said she, "have lost my husband." And so for a while they mourned in silence. Then he said, "Since you and I are in like case, shall we not do well to marry and live together? I shall take the place of your dead husband, and you, that of my dead wife." The Woman consented to the plan, which indeed seemed reasonable enough: and they dried their tears. Meanwhile, a thief had come and stolen the oxen which the Farmer had left with his plough. On discovering the theft, he beat his breast and loudly bewailed his loss. When the Woman heard his cries, she came and said, "Why, are you weeping still?" To which he replied, "Yes, and I mean it this time."



The Old English Town

Goose Howards



Preface

*As God shaped man from ashes, the
Anglo was of chalk dust
And a dark hour approaches while their
Seax blades rust*

*Beyond the day, an Englishman, in the
peace of an afternoon
Surveys his home and lands, weighing
up his burdens, his doom
Looking over the rolling hills and over
every rolling road
His fate is plainly understood as the old
prophets foretold:*

*Ye shall struggle every morning
and find no rest in the night
Ye shall be vexed on every side,
and will fall in every fight
Ye shall find nothing of mind or
matter by which ye can be saved
Your kin shall betray ye, your
nation shall perish in the grave*

*Though these nights loom over us like the
oldest sin of man
And all our prayers seem felled by cold
and evil hands
With a faith like fire stoked by countless
desperate fights
After hopeless strife we shall purge them
from these lands*

*We forgive you dark invaders; we
forgive our rulers their scorn
We forgive all you traitors after the
teaching of our Lord
And may God in Heaven wash us clean
for our sins and follies too
But forgiveness without forgetting is no
forgiveness true*

*But though we cast no blame we still
shall dash asunder
Each foe. For after our mercy comes our
rolling thunder*

boxes, plain stone boxes; from afar it must've looked like the corpse of leviathan, glass and stone ribs reaching upwards and over the specks of life moving underneath like bacteria. Under the blanket of garish white street lights,

*Listen! That the playing of The Last Post
be not truly our last
Listen! Harken to the promise told by
those same prophets past
Though the grave looms behind us and
our blood is in the grass
The Saxon's fall was steep and tall, but
his rise will be twice as fast*

*Will the White man walk on the hour,
and find his heart within?
And from Avalon cometh Arthur, and
from under hills wake kings?
Shall he be saved once more to cast off
the age's wicked spell?
The light of the world pour from his eyes,
lest he fall to hell?*

Pilot

Friday night was busy as the clocks turned towards midnight. The pub swelled with karaoke; voices trying to leap over the music, and other struggling souls, to be heard by someone else. The drinks failed increasingly to sooth the throats of one group, whose members looked at one another with brows raised, dried eyes, and resting lips. One of them shouted with the last hoarse push of his lungs, calling the other three to leave and find a quieter place.

The pubs in this town were largely styled the same way: late 20th century buildings with white walls framed by dark timber in the Tudor style, and interiors of dark brown wood, burgundy carpets, beige walls filling the rest out. Such buildings were often crushed between immense glass monoliths, smaller glass

and the washed out night above it, conversation resumed with ease. The next pub was

on the other side of the street and the four soon entered.

'... treating me like I'm some sort of freak ever since I wanted to climb this tree—'

'It's pretty weird though for a guy in his twenties to be doing that.'

'What do you all want?' Tom asked the rest, pausing the subject while they each replied.

'Anyway, Will, I think you're just over-socialised and domesticated. You've become weak and decadent,' Jacob replied half-laughing, 'but don't worry, if things fall through then that should change.'

'You think?' chimed Ben.

'Maybe...' The five stopped as they took their drinks. Jacob glanced around, then towards one end of the room where a group of girls sat. They seemed jovial from their excited chatting, shrill peaks of laughter, tittering gasps for breath. One of them glanced in his direction. She seemed fairly attractive at this distance, which emphasised the shapes of her dark blonde hair, small body, the lively expressions of her eyes and mouth, while masking ugly details or reactions that being too close may reveal. The conversation resumed and Jacob's glance would try to rest back upon her throughout, while trying to hide this intent.

'... A couple of years ago it looked like they might finally turn the screw, make a martyr out of me, but nothing ended up happening. It was back to normal and I was no

better off. I think I wasted my life doing that, I could have done anything else but I just wasted those years.' Tom finished; the others looked thoughtful. Ben and Will looked up first and spoke, changing the subject when they also noticed the group of girls.

'We know how you are on that subject, Ben—'

'Shut it.'

The establishment had a beer garden surrounded by a fence taller than most men, and decorated with a couple of benches which were heavily lathered in light brown paint. The floor was half concrete slabs and half plastic grass. Tom, Will, and Jacob went out for fresh air and to smoke. After two drawn out drags, Tom spoke to Will; 'This coat's not doing much with the cold'.

'You should have brought a thicker one.'

Meanwhile, Jacob's gaze was bouncing off the windows down to the open doorway back into the pub looking at all the various persons there, his eyes lingering a little longer on the girls he saw. He began to shiver slightly under the faint protection of a hoodie and jeans. 'How's the allotment doing?'

'Finished, I've moved everything to my garden now. The Pikey that owns the land there's kicked five of us off cause he's building stables on it.'

'I see. Shame.'

Jacob stood on a bench to look over the fence into the street. He saw an average group of girls walking by. The distance distorted their forms so he saw the exposed flesh, shiny black leather, moving blonde heads come together as a wall of shifting flesh. 'We've been missing you at church.'

'I know, I've been milling about too much at home, I know I should get down more—'

'You should. We've started keeping it open until midnight since we have people working late in the connected offices.' Will turned towards Jacob, still staring into the street, 'Jacob, how've you been lately?' Jacob looked down suddenly, his brow lowered also, then he looked up and answered.

Eventually, thirst subsided, no more drags, all the energy to talk dried up and the men parted ways for the night. Jacob made a brisk walk towards the usual bus stop. He saw a steeple peeping over a row of low, square buildings. There was no rush. He strolled across the road to a small street to see the peeping - rather the pointing - building there. Compared to the much taller flats around, which seemed to vainly reach towards the sky, this one referred you upwards and reached not. Although it was old, dark, and in a cleft between three larger structures, it was still there and some light was still present inside.

Jacob entered. The noise of people, cars, buses, music, seagulls, the wind were all muted. The interior was divided in three by pillars and filled with pews. Jacob sat near the back and close to the entrance. Looking upwards, he stopped at the hanging figure of the Messiah

crucified. He stared at His face and waited, as if waiting for the gentle visage to awaken with thunder and righteous fury pouring out of His eyes, mouth, and nose. As if the silence were there so something could be heard. Something slight seemed to rise in him, then subside. His concentration was broken by the ambling of slow footsteps approaching. It was a round old lady. 'You don't have to leave just yet, stay a while longer.'

'It's fine I was finished anyway.' He left for the bus stop.

On the bus he crammed himself in a seat, his limbs being too long to sit comfortably. Regardless of his discomfort, the natural rocking of the large vehicle made his eyelids heavy. The bus eventually stopped, abruptly jerking him out of his semi-slumber. Stumbling out before the train station and the coast behind it, he could just about make out the lighthouse, Ferris wheel, and pier looming in the distance. The esplanade was dotted with small lights but mostly black. He could hear the tide. While absent minded, something small and slightly heavy collided with his back. Jacob turned to see a girl. They both failed to say anything. Instead, they stood a moment, and stared at each other in a limbo of competing polite instincts: not to bother a stranger versus apologising for bothering a stranger. Her smile seemed tortured (the former polite instinct may be winning), her features were pale and ordinary, her hair light brown in darkness, but blonde where light shone through. If he squinted his eyes the mousy maiden could have been any girl, he'd seen previously that night, although she was smaller

and wore a plain coat that covered most of her. With a start her eyes lighted on something at the bus shelter, with a look of panic she darted the other way, and set off running to the poorly lit esplanade. Jacob followed her glance, but only saw regular parties of couples and friends taking no notice of the girl or himself. He looked the other way before losing sight of her, and saw there an odd colour on the back of her coat: a blot of a dark colour, clearly visible against her plain and cream coloured clothing even at this distance. There were also some tiny things around her head, glinting in the LED lights.

Jacob continued to look where she went, his face stuck in a puzzled expression, till his feet drifted forwards as rationality seemed to flee him. He began to follow after her. He reached the esplanade where the lighting grew warmer, darker, and further apart. Jacob ran straight, focussing only on the girl, who was just then approaching the pier. He passed the wall of the fairground where skeletons, provocative red women with horns, and other painted devils lurked on the outside walls of the attraction. Further along he passed two dark children playing with a cricket bat and ball. Both of them turned towards him with wide bulging eyes, and black pits within them, before scuttling away. Arriving at the pier he saw a figure flicker past the light on its edge. Jacob slowed his pace as he progressed, for there was nowhere left but the sea if she fled even further. Stopping in the darkness between the last two lights, he witnessed some sort of movement at the further edge of the final light.

Reason seemed to hit – the danger of the situation was obvious – but he felt as though something was dragging him forwards. He had no power to escape, regardless of the heat radiating from him, sweat soaking his hair, face, skin and the chill of the night blowing through any part of him uncovered. He began to hear strange unintelligible voices and began to make out a few persons facing away from the light. His whole body seemed heavy, like his presence was condensing in the cold and dripping about him. His head was light, there was a pit in his stomach, blurred waves started to come over his vision as he crept closer. The figures detected him and turned around. What once resembled a human figure became the large head of a dark man with wide bulging eyes, with black pits within them; the body attached was made up of six limbs – three on either side – six large brown fingers keeping the head upright. Behind him a giant silhouette towered over from a wide base, reaching its pinnacle in a misshapen head-shape. It could have resembled a small giant on his knees. Beside the giant there was only a set of large grinning teeth and eye whites, but he couldn't make out if a figure was attached to them. The creatures made no motion whatsoever, but Jacob's nausea, the waves in his vision, doubled. Muscles began to spasm and something within him retreated, as if his soul was trying to retreat when his body could not. Whatever he could see dissolved into vertical streaks of colour, till all was completely distorted and all feeling left him. Only panic remained.

Soon the panic subsided and he could see once more. The distortions still lingered in the spaces

he wasn't focused on. He couldn't feel or detect his body's condition. A girl stood above him and fairly near, but it wasn't clear if it was the same one as before for she was arrayed in more regal, natural raiment. Were it the same girl, her past appearance was but a melodic echo of this lovely song before him.

*She stood above, planted to the earth
And a great distance was between us
For her eyes looked upwards and far
away
Against her veiling, the waning of the
day*

*Robed in rushing red and foaming white
Over opal skin; around a pale face
With morning eyes and lips light
Spoke words from another time and
place:*

*Fools and fallen of England, I
call upon you now
To honour your fathers, and do
kindness to your race
Remember Alfred, Arthur,
Hengist and cease to be proud
Behold! Before God you are
naked, so suddenly be ashamed*

*To none will I give my name, in
knowing it he will rule me
No guide will I give you brave
fools who would rush and seek it
Rather than barbarians in
reflection, your hands shall no longer
stay*

*With loins awake and full of fury,
see the task and make haste*

*Ignorant and tumbling men! To
the darkness that lies in wait
Once again you are the hare on
the hills – to be hunted seems your fate
But should you bare the hunt, I
say you shall be great again*

*For this I bear to the sons of this
isle; to all English men*

*Good news to poor men who in
this world are scorned
Time and chance enter again and
a new age is born*

It was unclear who she was speaking to, she never looked down to him. Her hand extended out gently and Jacob began to muster strength and tried to grab it. 'Sounds like everything I've ever dreamed of,' he sighed and the weight of a great dull ache flattened him. 'I feel so tired all the time these days, like I'll really fall asleep and wake up in a different place, maybe it's really happening this time.' The maiden was completely still and unresponsive to his ramblings. 'I accept your offer, show me this new place, you won't struggle with me. Whatever you want to do.' There was no response as she seemed to drift further away. Jacob had no strength to yell, but a slight pain began to buzz inside his skull and vibrate through his whole head. 'Please, I can't keep living like this. What hope is back there?' Her form and the colours of her robe started to break down; the colours of the sky around her seemed to overtake and envelop everything. A knot of tension seemed to release inside of his head and the sensation of burning wetness returned to him. His eyes closed through his own will; his hand stopped, relaxed, and fell back down.

Jacob awoke to a shudder of alertness. He found himself walking back towards the train station cold, drunk, and ill. Before the station he stopped. Gentle snow descended

plentifully, some of it fell before another garish light above the station entrance, tiny and glinting. In his tired drunken state the snow could be mistaken for the stars brought low, as small as they appear from afar. Looking down he tried to recall in his mind what he had experienced. It was just a mess of confusion, of figures remembered partially through the ghosts of TV, video games, and Japanese cartoons. There was a girl... another world, but he would be late for his train if he didn't hurry. Looking ahead he strode forward into the station. Also walking towards the station were a group of older men with their wives. In a sleepless, drunken state they could be mistaken for a horde of skinny pot-bellied goblins with long, thin, dipping noses. Alongside them were larger mounds of flesh, topped with bleached blonde fauna, growing from darker roots, tied together with

scant string, leather and the whole carcass was flush with blood washing through it.

*In the saturation of summer days
Or under torrents of rain and snow
The picture that escapes my eye's gaze
The song I've never heard, yet know*

*The closest I get to grasp it
And at last leap to seize the day
Is when I imagine joyful company
Rivalry, brotherhood, and romance
again*

*To share each occasion together
To share great emotions in our souls
To know feelings of every colour
To know great effort, toil, and repose*

*Or maybe these are just electric ghosts
Haunting the crevices of my mind*



The Game of Chess

A Play in One Act

Kenneth Sawyer Goodman



The Scene is a wainscoted room in the house of ALEXIS. High windows at the back left; at the right back is a double door giving into an ante-room; against the right wall is a couch; in the left wall near the back is a small door; nearer the audience, on the same wall a chimney breast with a carved mantel; under the window, at the back, another couch and several chairs give the room a luxurious air. ALEXIS and CONSTANTINE are playing chess at a small table in front of an open fire. There is a large table in the centre of the stage with fruit, a flagon of wine and glasses.

ALEXIS. You seem to have lost your cunning, Constantine.

CONSTANTINE. Wait!

ALEXIS. Perhaps the pawn?

CONSTANTINE. No. [*He moves.*] So!

ALEXIS. Ah, ha! That, eh? Well, well! The cunning is returning, is it?

[*He strikes a little bell beside him and again scans the board.*]

CONSTANTINE. Is the hour up, your excellency?

ALEXIS. No, no! We still have ten minutes to play.

CONSTANTINE. Your excellency tires of the game, perhaps?

ALEXIS. No, I never tire of the game. When I do that, I shall tire of life itself. Chess is as much a gauge of a man's mental development as love or war or politics or any other game. When I play bad chess, I shall have ceased to be a competent governor. We patricians do not justify our lives by the toil of our hands. We should tune the machinery inside our skulls to its highest effectiveness. We must keep it tuned and timed and oiled. Ah, yes, it is that way we serve. When the machine balks or stops we are nothing.

CONSTANTINE. But your excellency was thinking of other things.

ALEXIS. Was I so? Well, well! We shall see, we shall see! I was thinking of other things, eh? [*He makes a move swiftly.*] There, match me that if you can.

CONSTANTINE. Ah! The one move that could have saved your king!

ALEXIS. There you have it! I doze, I dream, my mind wanders, and then it comes in a flash. The one move on the board! It is by such flashes I know myself.

CONSTANTINE. Your excellency has inspiration.

ALEXIS. Perhaps! But behind inspiration, always, the technique of the game.

[*A footman enters.*]

FOOTMAN. Your excellency rang?

ALEXIS. Is the man, Shamrayeff, waiting?

FOOTMAN. A man, Boris Ivanovitch Shamrayeff, with a letter from your excellency, is waiting in the secretary's room.

ALEXIS. You may bring him here in three minutes.

FOOTMAN. Pardon, excellency, but the secretary wishes to know if the orders received from Mr. Constantine are correct.

ALEXIS. What orders?

FOOTMAN. That the man, Boris Ivanovitch Shamrayeff, is not to be searched.

ALEXIS. There is no occasion to search the man. [FOOTMAN *bows and withdraws.*]

ALEXIS. [To CONSTANTINE.] Your move, my dear Constantine. We have exactly two minutes to finish the game and one minute for questions. [He *lays his watch beside the chessboard.*]

CONSTANTINE. [*Moves.*] So!

ALEXIS. Ah! One moment! There! What now? [He *moves.*]

CONSTANTINE. This. [He *moves.*]

ALEXIS. And this! [He *moves.*]

CONSTANTINE. Ah ha! I could check-mate your excellency in five more moves.

ALEXIS. The two minutes are up. Tell me, you are quite certain that your agents made no mistake in the matter of this man, Shamrayeff?

CONSTANTINE. Quite certain, your excellency. I begged you to have him put under arrest yesterday. There is absolutely no question. The man's entire history is in your hands.

ALEXIS. And, in spite of all this, I have granted him a personal interview. I have given explicit orders that he is not to be searched. In short, I must be a fool, eh?

CONSTANTINE. I cannot question your excellency's judgment.

ALEXIS. Ah, you can't question my judgment, eh? But you think! I saw something behind your eyes just now when you said you would check-mate me in five moves. You were thinking, "Alexis Alexandrovitch, for all his fine talk, is not what he used to be. Something has slipped away from him." Do you think I've become a coward?

CONSTANTINE. Your excellency!

ALEXIS. I sometimes think so, myself; that sometime there will be no flash, that I shall be check-mated once and for all. That's why I keep you here, hour after hour, playing chess with me; that's why I am tempted to try another kind of game with this man, Shamrayeff.

CONSTANTINE. Then you have a definite reason for seeing this man?

ALEXIS. None that you would understand.

CONSTANTINE. But, in that case, might I point out to your excellency— Surely it would be safer—

ALEXIS. Don't speak to me as if you were speaking to a child. I know what you think: "Alexis Alexandrovitch is not what he was. Things are slipping past him, he needs watching." Well, the time is up. You have your orders.

CONSTANTINE. Shall I take away the chessmen?

ALEXIS. No, leave them as they are. We'll finish the game when I ring for you. [CONSTANTINE *rises and hesitates.*] Well, well, well! You're going to say something. You think the game won't be finished. We'll see. We'll see about that!

CONSTANTINE. I beg your excellency—

[FOOTMAN *enters, followed by SHAMRAYEFF.*]

FOOTMAN. Boris Ivanovitch Shamrayeff.

[SHAMRAYEFF *wears the clothes of a respectable artisan. He is, apparently, somewhat younger than ALEXIS, strongly built and has a rather fine but stolid face. He stands with his cap in his hand.*]

ALEXIS. So, so! You are Boris Ivanovitch Shamrayeff, are you? Well, well!

BORIS. Yes, I am Boris Ivanovitch Shamrayeff!

ALEXIS. You found it hard to get at me, did you? Hard to get an interview with Alexis Alexandrovitch?

BORIS. Not so hard as I had expected, your excellency.

ALEXIS. [To CONSTANTINE *and* FOOTMAN.] Well, what are you waiting for? This man has something important to say to me. He's bashful. He can't speak out before so many people.

CONSTANTINE. Your excellency, I will wait in the passage.

ALEXIS. Nonsense, nonsense! Go into the garden and think about your game of chess! Go! [CONSTANTINE *and* FOOTMAN *go out.*]

ALEXIS. [To BORIS.] Sit down in that chair. I want to look at you. [BORIS *looks around uneasily.*] Ah! There is no one watching us. This room is in a corner of the house—nothing but windows behind you, no balcony, no hangings. Open the door you came in by—there is no one in the passage. Turn the key, if you like.

[BORIS *steps quickly to the main doors, throws them open, looks into the passage, shuts them again, turns the key in the lock and slips it into his pocket.*]

You see we won't be disturbed. Now, sit down and tell me what you want. [BORIS *sits down but says nothing.*] Tongue-tied, eh? You don't know how to begin? Embarrassed, eh?

BORIS. No. I was only wondering.

ALEXIS. Ha, ha! Wondering, eh?

BORIS. I was wondering why your excellency chose to give me this opportunity?

ALEXIS. This opportunity?

BORIS. [*Looking up.*] This opportunity to kill your excellency.

ALEXIS. So, so! To kill me? That's it, is it? Well, well! I thought as much, but of course, I couldn't be sure. Well, well! Go on, go on!

BORIS. [*Simply.*] God has delivered you into my hands.

ALEXIS. Pah! Leave God out of it! Don't give me any such cant nonsense. I doubt if God takes any interest in either of us. I have delivered myself into your hands. That's the simple fact of the matter. I could have trapped you so easily, too, but I didn't even have you searched. You may as well take the pistol out of your pocket.

BORIS. Your excellency seems amused.

ALEXIS. No, no, not amused! I'm only curious to see you handle the thing—morbid curiosity, if you like. Take it out, man, take it out!

BORIS. This is a solemn moment for us both, your excellency.

ALEXIS. Solemn, eh? Well, well! Solemn! Oh, I suppose it is solemn for you, Boris Ivanovitch To me it is simply curious grotesque. Well, well!

BORIS. [*Takes out pistol.*] Keep your hand a little further from that bell, if you please.

ALEXIS. I shan't ring. You would hardly wait for them to answer the bell, would you? No, no! I'm not such a fool as to think you'd do that? Well, well! I lift my hand and you shoot.

BORIS. Yes.

ALEXIS. Exactly. Well, I won't lift my hand.

BORIS. Nothing on earth can save you, Alexis Alexandrovitch.

ALEXIS. Nor you, my friend, for that matter! You hardly expect to leave the house, shall we say, unmolested?

BORIS. I do not expect to leave it alive, excellency.

ALEXIS. No, that would be asking too much. I was here to let you in. I won't be able to let you out again. You will have lost a useful friend, Boris Ivanovitch.

BORIS. Your excellency!

ALEXIS. It is in your hands to end the interview. Come, come, you must hate me a great deal, my friend, to give your own life for the sake of taking mine.

BORIS. I do not hate you.

ALEXIS. So? How odd! I thought that everyone of your sort hated me. You might at least flatter me to the extent of showing some emotion. Come, come, flatter me to that extent.

BORIS. I do not care to flatter you.

ALEXIS. Ah, well, well! I shall have to do without it then.

BORIS. My own feelings have nothing to do with it. I am an instrument of God.

ALEXIS. God again! What has God to do with it? Do you happen to play a good game of chess?

BORIS. [*Nervously.*] Why do you ask me such a thing?

ALEXIS. Because you interrupted a game here. Constantine threatened me with check-mate in five more moves. Check-mate in five moves! No, no! Not so easy as that!

BORIS. I have had enough of your jestings, excellency.

ALEXIS. You won't play then? Well, well! I had promised myself to finish the game. We shall see! We shall see!

BORIS. Surely your excellency has something you wish to say—

ALEXIS. I have told you once, when you tire of the interview it is in your hands to end it. What are you waiting for? You become tedious!

BORIS. Have you no desire to pray, excellency?

ALEXIS. Pray? Pray? Who would listen to me? No, I'd rather chat.

BORIS. As your excellency likes.

ALEXIS. Yes, yes, we'll chat until you gather courage to do what you came for.

BORIS. It takes no courage to kill a thing like you.

ALEXIS. It takes a certain kind of courage to kill—rats.

BORIS. I have been chosen, excellency.

ALEXIS. So, so! The lot fell on you, did it? The honour! The distinction! You look at it in that way, don't you? Like the rest of your kind, you have political ideas, eh?

BORIS. I have no political ideas.

ALEXIS. No political ideas? Well, well! No personal hatred? Pray explain yourself, man.

BORIS. I am a peasant. My father and my father's father were peasants. You are a noble. Your line runs back to Tartar princes. It is a matter of centuries of pain and slavery against centuries of oppression and violence. I take no account of to-day, only of yesterday and tomorrow. Your acts have been cruel and harsh, doubtless. I hardly know. I throw them out of the scale. I throw out my own sufferings. They are not enough in themselves to tip the balance. You and I are nothing. It is caste against caste. I gave myself to the revolutionary party, yes! I am their agent as you say, but I know little of their ideas for Russia. I care less. I only know that the band to which I belong represents the struggle which I feel in my own breast. I am their willing tool. I do their will because the right of vengeance comes down to me in the blood.

ALEXIS. Yes, yes! A fanatic!

BORIS. It is my order against yours.

ALEXIS. Ah, your order against mine, eh? Centuries of pain against centuries of oppression. Well, well! You set aside to-day, do you? You throw your own little pains and penalties out of the scale on one side, and my little tyrannies and floggings and acts of villainy out on the other? You see yourself only as the avenger of a caste against a caste. The right of vengeance and the need of it comes down to you in the blood, does it? You're exalted by the breath of dead peasants, are you? It's because of that and only because of it that you take pride in the work you have set your hand to. Huh! Grotesque! You strike the air with a rod of smoke. You've stumbled upon the essence of the inane. You're about to commit a fantastic mockery of Justice.

BORIS. I have held my hand too long!

ALEXIS. Wait! There is still something to be said; something for you to think of in the moment between the time you take my life and the time you take your own. You are about to kill the man you might have been yourself. You are about to—I, and not you, are Boris Ivanovitch.

BORIS. What rubbish are you talking now?

ALEXIS. You are Alexis Alexandrovitch!

BORIS. Why! You are mad!

ALEXIS. Wait! When you were a child, you had a foster-brother. You ran with him in the fields. You slept by his side at night. You fought with him over rough toys and bits of food. When you were seven years old, a man on horse-back came and took him away. You never knew his true parentage and your father flogged you when you cried for him. Can you remember that?

BORIS. Aye, I can remember that well.

ALEXIS. Your father deserted your mother the following year. A little later she died. She told you nothing of the other child. You went to Kieff, to the house of your uncle, and became apprenticed to a bootmaker.

BORIS. Leave off! You can't mystify me by telling me the story of my own life. It proves nothing. Your agents have ways of knowing such things: what I was, what I am, everything.

ALEXIS. Yes! Leave all that! As you say, it proves nothing. Yet we are foster-brothers, you and I.

BORIS. A sign!

ALEXIS. Our good mother was endowed with a grim sense of humour. She sent her own boy to be reared as the son of princes, and the little aristocrat, left with her for safety at the time of the Makaroff meeting, she sent to—well, you know to what sort of a life she sent him.

BORIS. Give me a sign!

ALEXIS. I have no sign to give you.

BORIS. Ah, ah! What else? What else have you to tell me?

ALEXIS. I, and not you, am the son of peasants. Do you see now why I call your errand grotesque?

BORIS. Lies! Lies! Lies! What do you expect to gain by telling me such lies?

ALEXIS. Nothing.

BORIS. Do you expect me to believe you? Do you expect me to embrace you and clap my hat on my head and toss this pistol out the window and tell you to do what you like with me?

ALEXIS. I expect nothing. I know that I am one dead man talking to another.

BORIS. I can't fathom you. I know there must be some trick up your sleeve, but I can't fathom you.

ALEXIS. There is no trick. You asked me why I chose to give you this opportunity to kill me. I'm telling you. That's all.

BORIS. Lies! Utterly useless lies!

ALEXIS. No! Utterly useless truth! Do you think I wish to believe myself Boris Ivanovitch Shamrayeff, born a peasant? I, who have sat in high places and given my life to preserving an order of men to which I do not belong, which my blood ought to cry out against. Do you think I would have believed it if the belief had not been forced upon me? I have ways of knowing truth from falsehood, my friend. You are striking at a man who is dead before you touch him. What I have found out in the past week, others already know. I have come to the end, I tell you. I have been a

fantastic dupe. I cannot go on. I would have killed myself to-day, but I have a horror of taking my own life. You have come in time to save me from that.

BORIS. Was that your only reason for seeing me?

ALEXIS. I admit I was curious to see another man who had been as great a dupe as myself.

BORIS. Lies! Lies! What else? Have you anything more to say?

ALEXIS. I only ask you to finish your work. Unless you have a scruple against killing your— In which case, go! The door is still open to you.

BORIS. [*Sneering.*] Very pretty! Very touching! Go back, eh? And tell my comrades that I let Alexis the Red slip through my fingers because he told me a child's story of changeling foster-brothers? No, no! [*He cocks his pistol.*]

ALEXIS. Kill me, then!

[*BORIS raises the pistol.*]

BORIS. I—

ALEXIS. Pull the trigger, man!

BORIS. I can't. There's a chance that what you have said may be true after all. [*He lays down the pistol.*] And yet, I can't live if it's false. And, by God, I can't live if it's true!

ALEXIS. In either case, we must both die.

BORIS. Aye, you speak the truth there, but I dare not kill you. I tell, you, I dare not! There must be some way out! Some other way!

ALEXIS. Are you brave enough to take poison? Yes! Good! Do you see this ring? I press a spring, so. There is a fine powder under the stone, so! I drop a few grains into one of these glasses. We draw lots. One of us drinks the wine and the other still has your pistol to use! It is very simple after all.

BORIS. [*Rises.*] Yah! Now, by God, I see the trick! Lies! Lies! Every word of it was lies! I can see through you now. You're devilishly cunning with your sleight-of-hand, but I draw no lots for poison with the like of you.

ALEXIS. Have it your own way. See, there's more than enough for both. Take the glass in your own hands, divide it yourself, pour the wine yourself, and then, to satisfy you, I'll drink first.

BORIS. You carry the bluff to the bitter end, do you? Well, we'll see.

[*He mixes the powder and pours the wine and hands one glass to ALEXIS.*]

ALEXIS. To your easy death, brother.

[*He lifts the glass and drinks.*]

BORIS. Ah! So you're a brave man after all! [*He lifts the glass and pauses.*] What if I were to leave you now, eh?

ALEXIS. My men have orders to seize you the moment you leave the room.

BORIS. In that case! [*He lifts the glass.*] To your final redemption, brother!

ALEXIS. Sit down! [*BORIS sits down.*]

BORIS. Have we long to wait?

ALEXIS. Perhaps five minutes. It's a Chinese concoction. They call it the draught of final oblivion. I believe it to be painless. I'm told that one becomes numb. Do you find yourself becoming drowsy?

BORIS. No. My senses seem to be becoming more alert. Your voice sounds very sharp and clear.

ALEXIS. Lift your hand.

BORIS. It seems very heavy. Are you afraid of Death, excellency?

ALEXIS. [*Eyeing him sharply.*] No, I am not afraid of Death, brother, not in the least.

BORIS. Nor I!

ALEXIS. Good! Now, move your feet.

BORIS. I don't seem to be able to. That's strange. I can't feel anything.

ALEXIS. Nor I! Can you get out of your chair?

BORIS. [*Slowly.*] I—I can hardly move my hand. I might move by a supreme effort but I haven't the will. I—I feel no pain, only a ringing in my head.

ALEXIS. So? Well, well! Can you still hear perfectly?

BORIS. Yes—yes, I can still hear.

ALEXIS. H'm, h'm.

BORIS. Tell me, on your hope of redemption, was what you said to me just now the truth?

ALEXIS. On my hope of redemption, eh?

BORIS. If it was, I ask you to forgive me.

ALEXIS. I have nothing to forgive.

BORIS. Thanks!

ALEXIS. On my hope of redemption, Boris Shamrayeff, everything I told you was lies! Lies! Lies!

[*BORIS struggles painfully to his feet and lurches toward the table, where he has laid the pistol. ALEXIS springs to the table, seizes the pistol and tosses it out of the window. BORIS supports himself against the edge of table, half sitting, half leaning*

against it, his mouth open, his eyes staring. He sways dizzily. ALEXIS stands before him.]

ALEXIS. Well, you can still speak, can't you?

BORIS. You fiend! You dog! You liar! Ha, ha, ha! At least you can't escape! No need for me to strike you!

ALEXIS. Ha, ha!

BORIS. Well! Sneer at me if you like. You are feeling the agony too, Alexis Alexandrovitch. You can't deny it.

ALEXIS. I am not dying, Boris Shamrayeff.

BORIS. But, I know! I saw! I saw you drink! You're dying, excellency!

ALEXIS. Yes, we drank together, didn't we? Well, well! And your eye wasn't off me an instant, was it? And you didn't lift your cup till I'd drained the last drop of mine, did you? Well, well, well!

BORIS. I saw you drink what I drank.

ALEXIS. Yes, I did drink it, Boris Ivanovitch, didn't I? But what is sending you down to fry in Hell with the stupid ghosts of your bestial ancestors is only embarrassing me with the slightest of headaches. [*He chuckles.*]

BORIS. It—it is not possible!

ALEXIS. Eh? An oriental trick. A man in constant fear of poison may accustom himself, little by little, to a dose that would blast the life of an ordinary man. A fantastic precaution these days, only interesting to an antiquarian like myself. Well, well, you can hear me, can't you? I tell you I could have taken the entire mess; half of it seems to have been enough for you.

[*BORIS makes an effort to get at ALEXIS but almost sinks to the floor.*]

No use, Boris Shamrayeff! I advise you to hold fast to the table.

BORIS. Why? Why have you done this thing to me?

ALEXIS. Body of St. Michael! I am of one order, you of another. You are a terrorist, a Red; the blood of my brother, shot down in the streets of Kronstadt, the lives of my friends, the preservation of the sacred empire—are these nothing? Nothing—beside your dirty petitions of right! Pah! God has delivered you into MY hands. I, and not you, am the instrument of God to-day! Boris Ivanovitch, can you still hear me? Eh?

BORIS. Yes!

ALEXIS. So! So! One thing more! Why did I risk my own life to get yours? You would like to know that, wouldn't you? Why did I let you in here at all? You'd ask that if you could. Ha, ha! Well, it was because men were thinking that Alexis Alexandrovitch wasn't what he used to be; because I

was beginning to think so myself. Because I had begun to doubt my own wits. I had to let myself be brought to bay. I had to look into the muzzle of your pistol. I had to pit my life against yours in a struggle where I had no other weapon, no other help, than this. [*He taps his forehead.*] I think it unlikely that Constantine will check-mate me in five moves to-day!

BORIS. Fiend! Fiend! Fiend! [*He crumples up and falls to the floor.*]

ALEXIS. So, it's over, is it? Well, well, well!

[*He takes a cover from the couch and throws it over BORIS and stands over him.*]

ALEXIS. [*As if exorcising a ghost.*] To the night without stars! To the mist that never lifts! To the bottom of nothingness! Peace be with you!

[*He turns and taps the bell and then seats himself at the chessboard. The FOOTMAN enters.*]

FOOTMAN. Your excellency rang?

ALEXIS. Go into the garden and find Mr. Constantine. Tell him I am ready to finish our game of chess.

[*The FOOTMAN bows and withdraws.*]

ALEXIS. [*Studying the moves on the chess board.*] So! So! The bishop—the queen! No! Yes, yes! I have it! I have it! Body of St. Michael, not in five moves, not in five moves tonight! Ah! Ha, ha! So! So! Well, well, well!

[*He rubs his hands softly and looks up just as CONSTANTINE enters.*]

CURTAIN.



Featured Artist: Caspar David Freidrick







439.

Caspar David Friedrich (5 September 1774 – 7 May 1840) was a German Romantic landscape painter, generally considered the most important German artist of his generation. He is best known for his allegorical landscapes, which typically feature contemplative figures silhouetted against night skies, morning mists, barren trees or Gothic ruins. His primary interest was the contemplation of nature, and his often symbolic and anti-classical work seeks to convey a subjective,

emotional response to the natural world. Friedrich's paintings characteristically set a human presence in diminished perspective amid expansive landscapes, reducing the figures to a scale that, according to the art historian Christopher John Murray, directs "the viewer's gaze towards their metaphysical dimension".

Page 02: View of a Harbour

Page 30: Cross in the Mountains

Page 31: Rocky Ravine in the Elbe Sandstone Mountains

Page 32: The dreamer

Page 33: Das Eismeer



St George and the Dragon

Hamilton Wright Mabie



In the year 280, in a town in Cappadocia, was born that great soldier and champion of the oppressed whom we call St. George. His parents were Christians, and by them, and especially by his mother, he was most carefully instructed and trained.

When the youth came to the age of seventeen years he took up the profession of arms, and since he was gifted with beauty of person, intelligence, and an exquisite courtesy, he rose rapidly to a considerable military rank. Especially he pleased his imperial master, Diocletian.

One day while the Emperor, who was devoted to the worship of Apollo, was consulting at a shrine of that god upon an affair of much importance, from the dark depths of the cavern came forth a voice saying, "The just who are on the earth keep me from telling the truth. By them the inspiration of the Sacred Tripod is made a lie." At once the Emperor was stricken with consternation and asked who these just people were. "Master," answered one of the priests of Apollo, "they are the Christians." This answer so enraged Diocletian that he rekindled his persecutions. Now from the first the young soldier George had burned with indignation because of the unspeakable cruelties put upon Christians, and he had spoken out boldly in defence of his brethren. His friends had counselled silence and prudence. But George would have none. He

knew, however, that he might be called upon to suffer at any time, and he hoped to do better work for the world and to die after braver effort. He therefore distributed his money and his fine apparel among the poor and needy, set free all the slaves he possessed, and went forth upon knightly travel.

While pricking one day through the plains of Libya he came to a certain city called Silene, the people of which were bewailing a dire misfortune that had come upon them. An enormous dragon had issued from a marsh neighbouring the town and had devoured all their flocks and herds. Already the monster had taken dwelling near the city walls, and at such distance the people had been able to keep him only by granting him two sheep every day for his food and drink. If they had failed in this he would have come within their walls and poisoned every man, woman, and child with his plague-like breath.

But now already all the flocks and herds had been eaten. Nothing remained to fill the insatiable maw of the dragon but the little people of the homes and hearths of all the town. Every day two children were now given him. Each child taken was under the age of fifteen, and was chosen by lot. Thus it happened that every house and every street and all the public squares echoed with the wailing of unhappy parents and the cries of the innocents who were soon to be offered.

Now it chanced that the King of the city had one daughter, an exceeding fair girl both in mind and body, and after many days of the choosing of lots for the sacrifice, and after many a blooming girl and boy had met an unhappy death, the lot fell to this maiden, Cleodolinda. When her father, the King, heard his misfortune, in his despair he offered all the gold in the state treasury and even half his kingdom, to redeem the maiden. But at this many fathers and mothers who had lost their children murmured greatly and said, "O King, art thou just? By thy edict thou hast made us desolate. And now behold thou wouldst withhold thine own child!"

Thus the people spake, and speaking they waxed wroth greatly, and so joining together they marched threatening to burn the King in his palace unless he delivered the maiden to fulfil her lot. To such demands the King perforce submitted, and at last he asked only a delay of eight days which he might spend with the lovely girl and bewail her fate. This the people granted.

At the end of the time agreed to the fair victim was led forth. She fell at her father's feet asking his blessing and protesting she was ready to die for her people. Then amid tears and lamentations she was led to the walls and put without. The gates were shut and barred against her.

She walked towards the dwelling of the dragon, slowly and

painfully, for the road was strewn with the bones of her playmates, and she wept as she went on her way.

It was this very morning that George, courageously seeking to help the weak, and strong to serve the truth, was passing by in his knightly journeying. He saw stretched before him the noisome path, and, moved to see so beautiful a maiden in tears, he checked his charger and asked her why she wept. The whole pitiful story she recounted, to which the valiant one answered, "Fear not; I will deliver you." "Oh noble youth," cried the fair victim, "tarry not here lest you perish with me. Fly, I beseech you."

"God forbid that I should fly," said George in answer; "I will lift my hand against this loathly thing, and I will deliver you through the power that lives in all true followers of Christ."

At that moment the dragon was seen coming forth from his lair half flying and half crawling towards them. "Fly, I beseech you, brave knight," cried the fair girl trembling, "Leave me here to die."

But George answered not. Rather he put spurs to his horse and, calling upon his Lord, rushed towards the monster, and, after a terrible and prolonged combat, pinned the mighty hulk to the earth with his lance. Then he called to the maiden to bring him her girdle. With this he bound the dragon fast, and gave the end of the girdle into her hand, and

the subdued monster crawled after them like a dog. Walking in this way they approached the city. All the onlooking people were stricken with terror, but George called out to them saying, "Fear nothing. Only believe in Christ, through whose help I have conquered this adversary, and live in accord with His teachings, and I will destroy him before your eyes." So the King and the people believed and such a life they endeavoured to live. Then St. George slew the dragon and cut off his head, and the King gave great treasure to the knight. But all the rewards George distributed among the sick and necessitous and kept nothing for himself, and then he went further on his way of helpfulness. About this time the Emperor Diocletian issued an edict which was published the length and breadth of his empire. This edict was nailed to the doors of temples, upon the walls of public markets, in all places people frequented, and those who read it read it with terror and hid their faces in despair. For it condemned all Christians. But St. George when he saw the writing was filled with indignation. That spirit and courage which comes to all of us from communion with the eternal powers heartened and strengthened him, and he tore down the unhappy utterance and trampled it under foot. Thus prepared for death George approached the Emperor. "What

wouldst thou?" cried Diocletian angrily, having heard from his proconsul Dacian that this young man deserved torture. "Liberty, sir, for the innocent Christians," answered the martyr. "At the least liberty, since their liberty can hurt no one."

"Young man," returned Diocletian with threatening looks, "think of thine own liberty and thy future." Before George could make answer the ill-will of the tyrant waxed to ardent hatred and he summoned guards to take the martyr to prison. Once within the dungeon the keepers threw him to the ground, put his feet in stocks and placed a stone of great weight upon his chest. But even so, in the midst of torture, the blessed one ceased not to give thanks to God for this opportunity to bear witness to Christ's teachings.

The next day they stretched the martyr on a wheel full of sharp spokes. But a voice from heaven came to comfort him and said, "George, fear not; so it is with those who witness to the truth." And there appeared to him an angel brighter than the sun, clothed in a white robe, who stretched out a hand to embrace and encourage him in his pain. Two of the officers of the prison who saw this beautiful vision became Christians and from that day endeavoured to live after the teachings of Christ.

There is still another tale that after George had been comforted by the angel who descended from heaven, his tormentors

flung him into a cauldron of boiling lead, and when they believed they had subdued him by the force of his agonies, they brought him to a temple to assist in their worship, and the people ran in crowds to behold his humiliation, and the priests mocked him.

The Emperor, seeing the constancy of George, once more sought to move him by entreaties. But the great soldier refused to be judged by words, only by deeds. He even demanded to go to see the gods Diocletian himself worshipped. The Emperor, believing that at length George was coming to his right mind, and was about to yield, ordered the Roman Senate and people to assemble in order that all might be witnesses of George's acknowledgement of his own, Diocletian's, gods.

When they were thus gathered together in the Emperor's temple, and the eyes of all the people were fixed upon the weak and tortured saint to see what he would do, he drew near a statue of the sun-god Apollo, and stretching out his hand toward the image he said slowly, "Wouldst thou that I should offer thee sacrifices as to a god?" The demon who was in the statue made answer, "I am not God.

There is but one God and Christ is his greatest prophet." At that very hour were heard horrible wailing sounds coming from the mouths of idols the world over, and the statues of the old gods either all fell over or crumbled to dust. One account says that St. George knelt down and prayed, and thunder and lightning from heaven fell upon the idols and destroyed them.

Angry at the breaking of their power, the priests of the gods cried to the Emperor that he must rid himself of so potent a magician and cut off his head. The priests also incited the people to lay hands on the martyr.

So it was commanded that George, the Christian knight, should be beheaded. He was dragged to the place of execution, and there, bending his neck to the sword of the executioner and absorbed in prayer, he received bravely and thankfully the stroke of death in April, 303.

So stands St. George ever before the youth of the world, one of the champions of Christendom, a model of courage, a brave interceder for the oppressed, an example of pure, firm and enduring doing for others, a true soldier of Christ.

The Cats of Ulthar

H.P. Lovecraft



It is said that in Ulthar, which lies beyond the river Skai, no man may kill a cat; and this I can verily believe as I gaze upon him who sitteth purring before the fire. For the cat is cryptic, and close to strange things which men cannot see. He is the soul of antique Aegyptus, and bearer of tales from forgotten cities in Meroë and Ophir. He is the kin of the jungle's lords, and heir to the secrets of hoary and sinister Africa. The Sphinx is his cousin, and he speaks her language; but he is more ancient than the Sphinx, and remembers that which she hath forgotten.

In Ulthar, before ever the burgesses forbade the killing of cats, there dwelt an old cotter and his wife who delighted to trap and slay the cats of their neighbours. Why they did this I know not; save that many hate the voice of the cat in the night, and take it ill that cats should run stealthily about yards and gardens at twilight. But whatever the reason, this old man and woman took pleasure in trapping and slaying every cat which came near to their hovel; and from some of the sounds heard after dark, many villagers fancied that the manner of slaying was exceedingly peculiar. But the villagers did not discuss such things with the old man and his wife; because of the habitual expression on the withered faces of the two, and because their cottage was so small and so darkly hidden under spreading oaks at the back of a neglected yard. In truth, much as

the owners of cats hated these odd folk, they feared them more; and instead of berating them as brutal assassins, merely took care that no cherished pet or mouser should stray toward the remote hovel under the dark trees. When through some unavoidable oversight a cat was missed, and sounds heard after dark, the loser would lament impotently; or console himself by thanking Fate that it was not one of his children who had thus vanished. For the people of Ulthar were simple, and knew not whence it is all cats first came.

One day a caravan of strange wanderers from the South entered the narrow cobbled streets of Ulthar. Dark wanderers they were, and unlike the other roving folk who passed through the village twice every year. In the market-place they told fortunes for silver, and bought gay beads from the merchants. What was the land of these wanderers none could tell; but it was seen that they were given to strange prayers, and that they had painted on the sides of their wagons strange figures with human bodies and the heads of cats, hawks, rams, and lions. And the leader of the caravan wore a head-dress with two horns and a curious disc betwixt the horns.

There was in this singular caravan a little boy with no father or mother, but only a tiny black kitten to cherish. The plague had not been kind to him, yet had left him this small furry thing to mitigate his

sorrow; and when one is very young, one can find great relief in the lively antics of a black kitten. So the boy whom the dark people called Menes smiled more often than he wept as he sate playing with his graceful kitten on the steps of an oddly painted wagon. On the third morning of the wanderers' stay in Ulthar, Menes could not find his kitten; and as he sobbed aloud in the market-place certain villagers told him of the old man and his wife, and of sounds heard in the night. And when he heard these things his sobbing gave place to meditation, and finally to prayer. He stretched out his arms toward the sun and prayed in a tongue no villager could understand; though indeed the villagers did not try very hard to understand, since their attention was mostly taken up by the sky and the odd shapes the clouds were assuming. It was very peculiar, but as the little boy uttered his petition there seemed to form overhead the shadowy, nebulous figures of exotic things; of hybrid creatures crowned with horn-flanked discs. Nature is full of such illusions to impress the imaginative.

That night the wanderers left Ulthar, and were never seen again. And the householders were troubled when they noticed that in all the village there was not a cat to be found. From each hearth the familiar cat had vanished; cats large and small, black, grey, striped, yellow, and white. Old Kranon, the burgomaster, swore that the dark folk had taken the

cats away in revenge for the killing of Menes' kitten; and cursed the caravan and the little boy. But Nith, the lean notary, declared that the old cotter and his wife were more likely persons to suspect; for their hatred of cats was notorious and increasingly bold. Still, no one durst complain to the sinister couple; even when little Atal, the innkeeper's son, vowed that he had at twilight seen all the cats of Ulthar in that accursed yard under the trees, pacing very slowly and solemnly in a circle around the cottage, two abreast, as if in performance of some unheard-of rite of beasts. The villagers did not know how much to believe from so small a boy; and though they feared that the evil pair had charmed the cats to their death, they preferred not to chide the old cotter till they met him outside his dark and repellent yard.

So Ulthar went to sleep in vain anger; and when the people awaked at dawn—behold! every cat was back at his accustomed hearth! Large and small, black, grey, striped, yellow, and white, none was missing. Very sleek and fat did the cats appear, and sonorous with purring content. The citizens talked with one another of the affair, and marvelled not a little. Old Kranon again insisted that it was the dark folk who had taken them, since cats did not return alive from the cottage of the ancient man and his wife. But all agreed on one thing: that the refusal of all the cats to eat their portions of meat or drink their

saucers of milk was exceedingly curious. And for two whole days the sleek, lazy cats of Ulthar would touch no food, but only doze by the fire or in the sun.

It was fully a week before the villagers noticed that no lights were appearing at dusk in the windows of the cottage under the trees. Then the lean Nith remarked that no one had seen the old man or his wife since the night the cats were away. In

There was subsequently much talk among the burgesses of Ulthar. Zath, the coroner, disputed at length with Nith, the lean notary; and Kranon and Shang and Thul were overwhelmed with questions. Even little Atal, the innkeeper's son, was closely questioned and given a sweetmeat as reward. They talked of the old cotter and his wife, of the caravan of dark wanderers, of small Menes and

another week the burgomaster decided to overcome his fears and call at the strangely silent dwelling as a matter of duty, though in so doing he was careful to take with him Shang the blacksmith and Thul the cutter of stone as witnesses. And when they had broken down the frail door they found only this: two cleanly picked human skeletons on the earthen floor, and a number of singular beetles crawling in the shadowy corner.

his black kitten, of the prayer of Menes and of the sky during that prayer, of the doings of the cats on the night the caravan left, and of what was later found in the cottage under the dark trees in the repellent yard.

And in the end the burgesses passed that remarkable law which is told of by traders in Hatheg and discussed by travellers in Nir; namely, that in Ulthar no man may kill a cat.



Erika Olafsdottir

Part 2

N.D. Wallace-Swan



Harold and Erika head quickly inside out of the rain.

“Hails, Father, Asta!”

No one answered. The hearth was cold. No one was home. The siblings had been gone for four nights. They headed to Harold’s house just down on the other end of the farmstead.

It was raining hard now, and the darkening skies withered the light. Harold opened his door.

“Hails Harpa!” Harpa was seated by the hearth.

“Come here, Erika,” Harpa said. “There is something you need to know.”

Harold knew immediately.

“Your mother Asta, has gone to the heavenly father. Her breath is gone. She has passed. Her remains are at the church. Your father is there in mourning. Do you want to go there?”

Erika was stunned. Dazed. Confused. She thought in her head, what was Harpa saying? She could feel the deep sadness. The silence. But she had the flowers. She had gotten so many, many flowers.

“We have the flowers, we have them! Quickly, let’s go use them to help her, maybe it is not too late, but we must get them to Pabbi!” said Erika, quickly

escalating her demeanour towards greater agitation. But it was too late. Her mother Asta was gone.

For a moment, time stopped for Erika; the world was breathless; raindrops froze in midair; the hearth’s flame didn’t dance, frozen like ice. They soon left for the church to see Father, all in a blur, held close by Harpa, a tender woman.

Inside the church it was cold and the modest Lutheran interior was lit by a few candles. Asta’s remains were on the table at the front, wrapped in linens. They approached the priest, Reverend Ketill Ketillsson, and he slid the linen from around her head to reveal her face so that Erika and Harold could say goodbye before the burial. Two of Asta’s cousins had dug her grave the day before, and the priest had painted her wooden grave marker white. This morning he had written on the marker as per her wishes:

“Here lay Asta Eriksdottir, Wife of Olafur Haroldsson. Mother of Erika Olafsson. Age 45.”

The funeral and burial would be tomorrow morning. Her father was there, but he was silent, frozen. Erika approached and hugged him. His tears had dried to his cheeks. Soon everyone went back to Harold’s home to eat, but nobody ate much. They spoke of their regrets, and their fallen hopes, expressing their

sense of loss. Erika cried quietly throughout, realizing how much her life was about to change.

“Life is hard,” said Olafur. “But no one gets out of it alive.”

Erika and Olafur returned to their home across the farmstead. It felt like forever, Erika recalled an individual drop of rain as it fell, as if she couldn't hear what else was happening around her. The sheep were sheltering in their paddocks. Black ones, grey ones, white ones. All huddled together to keep warm. Some beautiful lambs were amongst them. Erika's mouth watered at the thought. Succulent roast lamb, the smell would fill the hearth for days afterward. She did enjoy a nice roast sheep's head in midwinter, but nothing beat lamb.

Soon enough they were home. Only it didn't quite feel like home. Things were as they used to be, her bed was in its place, herbs drying in the rafters amongst the linens. Mortar and pestle sat on the table. Erika made her way to her bed and put on her night clothes. She lay on the soft wool mattress, sat upon a rudimentary wooden frame, pulled her warm wool blanket over her body and started to curl up. Her father came over and kissed her on the forehead and headed to bed as well. It was a silent night.

Erika awoke. The house was foggy inside. She called for her father, but he didn't answer. She searched the house, and it felt like her feet were heavier than normal. She went outside and walked out into the pasture. There was a tall cross set up in the field, sheep were huddled around it. A single lamb was horrifyingly crucified upon the cross. It looked like it was squealing but no sound was coming out. It wriggled slightly, suffering. Erika tried to push through the mass of sheep, but they wouldn't let her through. She couldn't discern one sheep from another as they all blended into one woolly mass preventing her from getting to the cross.

She reversed course and made her way to her brother's house. The door was stuck, she banged on the door but no one answered.

“HAROLD! HARPA!” she yelled with all the force of her young voice. There was no response. Erika was confused. She headed to the church to see if anyone was there. The walk there was very odd. Silent. No one was around. She knocked on the doors of the church. No answer. She pushed on the door. It opened, but it was a bit stiff like the hinges need oiling. There was a figure inside, dressed in a long black dress, with a black veil over its head. It seemed to be facing away from Erika, towards the altar, standing near where her mother's body had been.

“Hel-hello?” a confused Erika asked. No answer. She walked quickly towards the slender figure at the end of the hall. She approached from the right side, and as she did the figure seemed to turn so that its back was always to her. She tried to move quickly, but her legs were stiff and the figure kept turning away. She noticed its feet were covered, so Erika said to the figure:

“Look at me, please! If you do not look at me I will lift your dress!”

The figure paused for a moment before sliding across towards Erika, leaning down, looking at her at eye level. The face was a skeleton, devoid of flesh. It screamed in her face with a sickening howl before its form turned to dust which then blew away. Erika was frozen, scared like a baby rabbit facing a fox. Silence followed the howl.

Erika left the empty church.

Outside, there was a funeral service happening. She had been to this sort of thing before, for her grandparents. She could see the people gathered and recognized them. Her father, brother, and Harpa too, only she wasn't pregnant, instead holding a baby, a boy it appeared. Her mother was there too, but she wasn't wrapped in linen, instead, she stood in full view, nude, wishing everyone goodbye as she made her way to the grave,

stepping down a set of stairs, which seemed to disappear when she got to the bottom.

Erika desperately struggled to say goodbye to her mother, who had now laid down at the bottom of the grave. The diggers started to fill the grave in, and the dirt started to cover her body. As Erika ran up to the grave, finally making her way through the crowd, she was able to see her mother's face, just as the last few shovels of dirt put a thin layer on top. Asta revealed a large grinning smile.

“MAMA!” cried Erika. She leaped into the grave and tried to sweep away the dirt, but there was nothing below. She kept digging but her mother was gone. She sat up after a few minutes gasping, and sweating, her father ran over to her bed to comfort her, as she awoke.

“Erika! Are you okay my girl?” He held her tightly. She was in her bed, in her house. Her father was there. She told her father about her experience.

“My dear, it was a dream. We are all here, we are all here...”

Olafur comforted Erika to sleep.

The next morning, Erika and her father hung the flowers and herbs she and Harold gathered earlier that week. This was to dry them out so they could be pressed and stored for later use. They could

be stored in a usable state for a few years in this manner. This all seemed pointless now.

The two dressed in nice clothing and went to meet up with Harold and Harpa. Erika told them about her dream. She told Harpa that their baby would be a boy.

“Oh? Well, if that is true, that is very curious, Erika. You would be an aunt to a little boy.”

Erika had never considered that before, that she would soon be an Aunt. It seemed like a big responsibility.

They made their way to the funeral at the Churchyard. Reverend Ketill performed the service, and Asta’s body was lowered into the grave. Dirt was shovelled back into the grave, creating a body-sized pile on top. Olafur hammered Asta’s gravemarker cross into the gravesite and left a small flower on the grave. Erika did the same, followed by Harold and Harpa, then Asta’s cousins. Everyone stayed around inside the church, talking to each other, remembering Asta’s life, telling jokes, laughing, crying, and hugging each other.

Afterwards, the four returned home. Harold, Olafur and Erika tended to the sheep. The sheep were gathered at one end of the pasture. An ewe was unexpectedly giving birth. The two men got to work to help the

poor ewe out, as it gave birth. Soon a brand new lamb was born, but he was not black, grey, or white. He was brown.

This was quite a surprise to the family, as there was never a brown sheep recorded. Ólafur immediately thought of breeding him with different sheep so he could get brown wool which fetched a higher price at the time. They took the mother ewe and the newborn into the small stone-walled and thatch-roofed barn so they could rest, away from the sheep masses.

“We should mark the mother and keep an eye on the lamb.” Harold said,

“Imagine the profits, father.”

Ólafur knew that the area hadn’t had brown sheep since Snorri Sturluson’s time. But none of that mattered now other than to keep an eye on the brown lamb, hoping he would keep his colour as he matured.

“When the Lord closes a door, he opens a window.” He said to his two children.

“The Lord is our Shepherd, and we ought to trust his plan. Like our sheep, we may not know the way, but we must trust in our Shepherd.”

They said their goodbyes and each made their way to their respective homes. Harold went

home to Harpa and they had a stew which Harpa prepared over the earth. As they lay in bed she whispered into his ear with her soothing voice, something unworldly and incomprehensible by his human mind, and he fell suddenly asleep.

Olafur and Erika also returned home and had a small meal of dry flatbread, water, and dried cod. They talked about Asta for a little bit, but both of them were quite tired and soon fell asleep.

The next morning, the sun had already risen, the father and daughter had a small breakfast and went into the pasture to check on the sheep. Several months went by like this, the typical life of farmers: herd the sheep here, then there, then back again, collect their manure for drying, wash the linens in the warm waters, hang it to dry, make flatbread out of flour, trade some raw wool for a continuing supply of eggs with a neighbour; attend church, visit Asta's grave, talk with friends. Life returned to normal after the death of Asta, Erika's mother.

Several months went by like this and the brown lamb grew quite a bit bigger than the other lambs. One day Erika noticed he had leaped the pasture fence and was hopping around in the meadow outside. The grass was greener there, and he was hungry.

Erika left the pasture to get him but he hopped away. She chased him, but his legs were strong. He bounded away and down the valley. She followed him for some distance before he became tired. While getting a hold of him, Erika ran into that pilgrim she and Harold spoke with a while ago when they travelled up the valley to find the Holurt flower.

"Hails, Thorgil. How long have you been up here?"

"Hello, girl! Oh, not more than a week I bet! I lost track of time, but it couldn't have been that long because I had only enough food for a week and I was not hungry. That's a big lamb you have there, a bit of a trouble maker is he?"

Erika nodded. The lamb was not cooperative, but she loved him and his unique brown wool. He was a naughty boy. Erika gave little notice to the comments on time and instead asked:

"Where were you at? The cave? Please tell me more about it, I have never been there." She asked.

"Oh, well it is only another hour or so down this way, it is early in the day, I could take you there to see it if you'd like. I am quite familiar with it now. Come see! It won't take long! Bring the lamb, he won't mind."

Erika tied some rope around the lamb's neck as a lead. She followed Thorgil who led the way to the cave.

They came to and crossed a stream, though the lamb fell in twice as he wasn't as sure-footed as Erika on the stepping stones. It was smooth water so it was no danger, but having him on a wad made rescue far easier. There was a somewhat desolate plain before them, with a few scraggly bushes here and there. The walk wasn't arduous, and the lamb had no problems. When they got to the cave entrance she was surprised. It was quite large, more than twice her height, and bigger as she went deeper inside.

"Quite beautiful isn't it?" Thorgil said, "The sparkling roof makes it look quite mesmerising." Thorgil lit a candle to show Erika the sparkling ceiling, she agreed it was quite astonishing.

"Why does it sparkle?" She asked.

"I do not know," he replied, "but look at the ground, some have fallen. Look, here."

He picked up a small sparkly stone about the size of Erika's palm and handed it to her. It had all sorts of colours, many she had never seen before. She put the stone in her pouch.

"Well, that's it. There isn't much more to this than that. It is a nice place to contemplate being but it

is quite lonely otherwise. Let's get out of here and get you and that lamb home."

"Where will you stay?" asked Erika.

"Oh probably with your reverend Ketill. I will ask him anyway. The worst thing is I will sleep in the church, and Christ can watch over me." He ended that with a wink.

They made their way back, lamb in tow, though he was not feeling as frisky as he did earlier, but he kept up with the two of them.

As they neared the settlement, things looked a bit different, but not by much. They went to the pasture and put the lamb back in with the herd. They then went to Olafur's house and knocked on the door.

"Pabbi it is Erika, the brown lamb escaped and I had to chase him up the valley and..."

The door creaked open. Inside the door there was a man Erika didn't know, behind him were two boys, near her age, and a woman. It seemed there was another family in her house.

"Who are you...girl? Why are you calling me Pabbi? Are you lost? Is this your father or brother? He looks like a monk."

"I am a monk who is heading back home after a pilgrimage. I

ran into Erika here on my way to Reykholt, from my seclusion in the cave there yonder, a few hours east by foot. My name is Thorgil.”

“Where is my father? Erika replied, “Olafur Haroldsson? Why are you in our house?”

The man looked confused.

“We have been living here for over four seasons. We are tenant farmers working for Harpa, just on the other side of the farmstead over there. She has two children. When her father-in-law died she needed help managing the farmstead, so we moved in rather soon afterwards. He died in his sleep - his son found him.”

“My dear I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news, he passed nearly five summers ago. I am so sorry. Was his son your brother I assume? Harold?”

Erika’s tears welled up in her eyes. She nodded yes.

“I am so sorry dear Erika. Harold died last winter. Harpa has been having a tough time of things ever since. You should go see her. All your things are there I believe, but some might be in the bigger barn. Go see her! Thorgil, please take her to the house across the way!”

They quickly left towards Harold’s house across the farmstead. They knocked. Harpa answered and opened the door, confused.



Druid

Without a Home

Chapter 2

Dreaming at the Seaside

Call of the Shieldmaiden



“We are going to the bay today,” said Freyja, her brown woollen dress brushing past him as she turned from the fireplace. “Have you been to the ocean, Degore?”

He shook his head.

“It will be a fun adventure,” said Uhtred from the table with his regular pile of papers before him. “You can bring Pawdraig with you.”

The little dog wagged its tail enthusiastically as it licked the last remnants of breakfast off Degore’s hands.

The sun was beaming down upon them as they set off. A donkey carried the few things they needed in baskets hung on either side of her stout grey back, and in one of the baskets sat Degore and Pawdraig. A boy slightly smaller than Degore sat in the other. It was a small party of some of the Abbey’s inhabitants, on their regular trip to the bay for fresh fish.

“No better place to store fish than in the ocean,” Uhtred quipped after explaining to Degore the reason for their journey.

They walked along enjoying the fresh air, filled with excitement and anticipation. They wound their way across the plateau, with its intermittent patches of open spaces and forest, and towards the sound of crashing waves in the distance.

Degore had asked the small boy opposite, who went by the name of Clancy, what the sound was, and was informed that the water leapt up and threw itself against the rocks. Degore was fascinated, it sounded thrilling.

He let Pawdraig creep across the back of the donkey and sit in Clancy’s basket.

They approached the edge of the plateau and a wide expanse of water opened up below them, stretching away into the distance. Cliffs fell away at their feet and huge mountains rose to the north.

“See far ahead,” Freyja pointed across the flat grey sheet of water, “that is a city on the edge of the cliffs over there.”

From the distant mists rose the tops of tall towers, and magnificent buildings were perched on the edges of the cliffs. They were quite small from where Degore was, but they must have been very large up close. Tall, proud spires of shining blue stone seemed to crowd the cliff edge, standing in defiance of gravity and reminding Degore of pictures of cities in the book of fairy tales his mother used to read him.

The memory of his mother darkened his brow—the throbs of pain had lessened somewhat in the months that had passed, helped along by the fastidious attentions of Freyja and Uhtred.

A glimmer caught his eye and he was brought back to the present.

“Can we go there?” asked Degore in astonishment, as a dragon circled the city. Dipping in and out of the mist, its scales glimmering in the sun.

“One day I am sure you will,” said Freyja, “but they are not the most welcoming of people, so you cannot go until you are grown.” She paused. “They steal dragons, so it's not a nice place.”

Clancy, who had stood up in his basket, had just begun to inquire as to what they did with the dragons when they abruptly started to wind their way down the steep path, and he was forced to sit back down and hang onto the edge of the basket. They were soon at the edge of the bay.

It was a glorious sight. Water shimmered, as if it could go on forever, before abruptly meeting the solid cliffs in the distance. To the east, the towers could still be seen, tall and imposing, and draped about with mist. The waves lapped gently against the gentle sloping shore of stones that led down into the water. It was a far cry from the silent forest and the pleasant meadows surrounding the abbey that he was used to. The constant noise of the water as it rushed in and out reminded Degore of the time he had splashed the water so much in his wooden bathtub that he had wet the floor. He grinned

slightly at the memory, though Freyja's stern looks and reproachful words had swiftly put an end to his mirth at the time.

Uhtred scooped Degore from his basket and stood him on a rock beside Clancy and Pawdraig.

Never before had Degore seen such a place. It was loud and very busy with hundreds of birds flying around. The birds were gulls, according to Clancy, and they came in a few sizes. Their white and grey feathers were sleek and alluring to Degore as they walked just out of reach in front of him, while others called and squawked in the air above. On the rock beach a short way off were fat birds with fluffy bodies and thin wings.

“What are those things?” He turned to his companion.

“Great auks,” was the response from Clancy. Pawdraig offered some information in the form of a short bark.

The three watched the creatures waddle into the water. “Can we go and catch one?” Degore asked.

Pawdraig jumped off the rock and started towards the auks, and the boys quickly followed.

The auks did not try to run away and only feebly struggled when Degore tried to pick one up. Clancy found a baby one and was patting it. Pawdraig rushed

around in fascination; being only a puppy he was still a bit scared of new things.

A light shone in Clancy's eyes as he hopefully suggested "We could take some of these home with us."

Degore's eyes lit up, "Can one live with us?"

Uhtred, who had come over just then, shook his head. "They prefer the ocean; they would be sad to leave it. But come away now, we do not want to distress them."

Uhtred picked up Pawdraig and Clancy followed him. Degore waved to the little auks and followed. The boys gathered up some driftwood, while Uhtred built a fire.

The men were hard at work preparing nets to be cast into the water. Strong hands pulled on the coarse netting as it was arranged on the stony beach. Soon they would drag it out waist deep into the water and bring in a healthy catch.

Degore wandered further and further in search of the ideal stick. Most of the driftwood on the beach was too bulky for him to hold comfortably, and as he wandered further, he soon found himself out of sight of the little group on the seaside. A bit further on and the snatches of their conversations faded too, and Degore was alone with the gentle wind and the crying seagulls that circled curiously

overhead before darting away. But he was not afraid, the perfect stick must be here somewhere.

"Hello there, young man!" A friendly voice roused Degore from gazing down at the rocky beach.

"Hello," Degore replied, gazing at the friendly brown eyes, the big beard and the coarse grey robes. "Are you a druid?" he asked.

"Why do you ask that?" the man smiled. He tossed his fishing line back into the water.

Degore squatted by the tiny fire and warmed his hands. "I see them coming to the abbey to rest before they go out again. You dress like them."

The man chuckled. "Yes, that is what I am. Grudaire is the name. And who might you be?"

"I am Degore."

"So, you live at the venerable St Carella's Abbey?"

"Yes, I live with Uhtred and Freyja." Degore shook the offered hand.

"Well, young man, how do you like fishing?" Grudaire pulled in his line. "They are not biting as well as I had hoped."

"You need a net like we are using." Degore offered.

"I just might!" Grudaire chuckled, "Come, sit with me, I have a story to tell you."

Degore sat with Grudaire, who lunged into stories of his travels. Wild, faraway places were fascinating to Degore, and the strange creatures thrilled and scared him. They caught a few fish in the meantime.

“Why do you travel?” Degore wondered “You go to all these places, but what are you doing?”

Grudaire smoothed his beard “We druids are given our instructions by the Abbot of our Abbey—I was raised here at St Carella’s so it’s here I come—we then go out and do as we are asked. Often it is visiting little villages to keep the spirits of the local priests up, and”—he said this in a confidential tone— “to keep them on the straight and narrow.” He chuckled and went on “We are unmarried, so we can often be sent to dangerous places as we have no family to be responsible for.”

“What are the tasks?”

“They can involve mundane things like gathering documents, or more dangerous things like healing and tending to injured people in a time of war.” Grudaire’s intense brown eyes surveyed the distant towers with interest. “That is where I want to go next.”

“Can I come?” Degore scanned the distance for the dragon, but it was nowhere to be seen.

Grudaire chuckled “When you are a bit older you will have the opportunity.”

“I want to see more dragons up close,” Degore sighed dreamily.

The two conversed a while longer on the dragons, and the land just the other side of the plateau where they lived in large numbers. Dragon’s Barren, it was

called, a vast area of land crowded with all kinds of landscapes, from scrub-covered, dry plains to thick forests, and of course Wraithall, the city of dragons, built on a scale of cathedrals and inhabited only by dragons. The topic fascinated Degore and he was filled with a desire to go and see it all.

“I think it’s time to get you back to your family,” Grudaire said at last. “We cannot have them worried about you.”

“But I want more stories!” Degore insisted, while stifling a yawn. Normally he went for a nap by this time.

Grudaire chuckled. “I will come by St Carella’s one of these days, and will tell you more then.”

Grudaire walked with Degore till they reached a spot where they could see Clancy and Pawdraig both biting Pawdraig’s tail. Behind them was the fire, dancing in the crisp sea air, and Freyja patting the donkey. The men were out in the water, yelling and gesticulating to one another.

“We will meet again, young man.” Grudaire shook his hand and was gone.

Degore sighed, he wanted more stories, and he was tired, and the fire was so far away. He yelled at Clancy, but he did not seem to hear. Degore sat down on a rock and leaned back. He must have fallen asleep as the next thing he knew:

Degore traipsed across arid plains in a strange and unfamiliar land. The hot, dry air felt a little oppressive. He was heading down a scrub-covered valley towards where the rocky outcrops formed a barrier in the distance. The small hills on either side were covered thickly with cedar trees, which gave off a dull roar in the strong wind that blew up above him. He was close enough to the ground not to feel it, but the pink baobabs that were scattered across the valley floor were waving energetically in the wind. Their white flowers crumbled into soft puffs that rose up to join the scattered clouds above him. Those clouds were gathering quickly, and soon acid rain would burn down upon the valley. The rain would scorch the plants and make them stunted. The only plants that grew well under these conditions were the baobabs which in turn blossomed profusely, producing more flowers which soon rose to join the clouds and produce more acid rain.

Up ahead the trees changed into munted, burnt pine trees, their needles struggling forth between regular showers of the burning rain. They formed a thick grove at the head of the valley. He looked at a young sapling, fresh and green, protected by the trees above. It was rare to see a young pine tree, as the rain usually burnt them before they had a chance to develop.

His eyes, just casually surveying the landscape, roved over a particularly burnt patch, then trailed from the rocks near him and up to the sky, but something drew his attention back with a snap. He stopped short in terror.

Yarri, the marsupial lion. She stood on a rock about 6 feet above him, half concealed by the crumpling yellowed pines, her brindled fur blending in with the tree trunks around her, and with tarnished yellow spots faintly dabbled across her back. The rock she stood on was overlooking the only way forwards.

He looked with terror down at her front paws which bent over the edge of the rocks. Her claws were out and the semi-opposable thumbs and front legs that bent like human arms horrified him on a primal level. She stood frozen, eyes fixed on him, her mouth slightly open so he could see the chisel-like front teeth. He realised she was as surprised to see him as he was her.

Knowing she could leap over and land on him in one bound made him break out into a cold sweat. Her kind did not use their big teeth to kill instantly, no, the yarri would hold its victim down with the glistening fangs and rip out its guts with the dexterous front paws—which were much too close to the functioning of human hands for comfort—with all those huge claws. The heat of the day was gone in an instant. He tried to

back away but his feet remained rooted to the ground.

The yarri turned in an instant and Degore noticed her pouch was full. As she disappeared into the trees, he saw the baby's head and a bloody front paw sticking out of the pouch. He had been saved by the baby's injuries.

He stood, rooted to the spot for some time, then burst into a run. He shot through the trees, along the path, and ran full blast into his father who was emerging from the family cave, which was halfway up the scree-covered hill.

His father was almost bowled over but he caught a nearby tree root just in time. "What is chasing you!?" His father was of average height and a tough, wiry man, his sun-tanned skin showing through the open neck of his shirt, and his brown hair bleached lighter by the intense sun.

"Yarri," Degore panted, looking behind him, his eyes bulging and his dark hair swept back over his shoulders.

"Was it following you? Where did you see it?" His father's voice was concerned and urgent.

"By the rock, halfway through the pines." Degore gulped as he thought he saw some branches moving.

"You may have led it straight to us!" His father turned and shouted something back into the cave, and his uncle appeared brandishing a spear. Uncle was a charming, well-spoken man,

merely five years Degore's senior, but his abilities and maturity made him seem at least ten. He had proven himself last summer when he fought off a small but aggressive lizard that kept trying to enter the cave. The frill around the lizard's neck stood out and its sharp snapping mouth had been ready to nip off a finger.

The men scanned the tree line below them, and muttered to each other. Degore heard his uncle take a swift gasp of breath. He turned to look in the same direction, but his eyes could make out nothing.

"We have to take this one down," his father was saying. "Can't have it knowing where we live."

Uncle nodded. "This will be a challenge" he gripped his spear, his eyes never leaving the spot. "It's gone up that tree there!" There seemed to be a strange excitement in his voice, as if the prospect of danger was thrilling to him.

"I will go around back, then," his father was saying. He grabbed Degore by the shoulder and guided him into the cave. "I want you to stay here and do not let that animal in. Your uncle and I will likely be able to deal with it. You will have your grandfather to help you."

The old man shuffled over to them, carrying a club. His right eye had been lost years ago in a fight, and he was nearing his last summer. But the old man's mind

was sharp and he was still a force to be reckoned with.

His father climbed up to the small hole in the back of the cave and was gone. All was silent. His grandfather sat by the door, listening.

Degore looked around the cave. It had been his home for as long as he could remember. It was perfectly situated beside a hidden waterhole, and shielded by trees. The inside was roomy and comfortable, it was made cosier and more familiar with his mother quietly grinding grain, and his grandmother napping beside his little sister. He looked down at her, her small brown curls were bright and springy and he remembered affectionately the evening before when the whole family was gathered around the fire. Uncle was banging on his old drum and his grandmother was on the didgeridoo. His sister danced to the music, and it was cute to him as she was still learning to walk and sometimes fell down.

He gripped the stone axe his father had thrust into his hands before leaving. He would defend his family from predators.

The hours wore on, but his grandfather never moved from the door. Degore had yawned a little too loudly on one occasion but, at a look from his grandfather, had straightened up his posture. Degore was sternly informed that patience was required in dangerous situations, and that distraction was as deadly

as a rash decision.

It grew dark outside, and the howl of a bunyip floated through the air and sent shivers down Degore's spine. The bunyip was an enormous water animal, who sought out women and children to eat under the cover of darkness. He turned his eyes from the small patch of tree he could see through the cave door. The fire had been stirred and the light bounced around the limewashed cave. His little sister had just woken up and was rubbing her eyes and his grandmother was slicing up some meat to add to the stew.

The bunyip howled again and Degore jumped up. "What is taking so long?" he asked.

His grandfather, who spent most of his time sitting as he worked, was now standing tall and straight. The bunyip howled again.

"Something is going on," he said and pulled Degore over to his side. "Pay attention, young man."

Degore glanced over to his mother—she was seemingly calm, but some lines on her forehead conveyed her concern. She was sticking pieces of dough against the sides of the oven.

Suddenly a 'coo-ee' came softly through the air, and in a moment father and uncle were in the cave, in one piece. His father had the hide of the yarri over his shoulder.

The family was relieved. Father tousled Degore's hair and tossed the sister into the air—she

loved it, though it worried mother how close she got to the cave roof. Degore noticed his uncle had a deep cut down his arm.

"Tell us how it went?" Grandfather held the bowl of broth for his wife to drink. Grandmother had been injured when a falling boulder had hit her as she walked under a cliff. She now spent her time wandering around and doing simple tasks.

Mother was pasting ground leaves onto the cut on uncle's arm. "You will heal, but there will be a scar," she was saying.

"You heard the bunyip." Father brushed the crumbs from his beard. "The creature was up a tree when we approached him. We chased him down the valley and over to the river. It was dark and we did not see the bunyip until it had risen out of the water and got its jaws around the yarri. The bunyip dragged the yarri sideways, unfortunately towards your uncle, as it dragged it back into the water, and the poor thing struggled and lashed out. Your uncle has been bleeding all the way home."

Degore shuddered. He imagined the bunyip's huge jaws ripping apart the yarri.

"The hide is intact as the bunyip just bit its head off and then left," Uncle was saying.

"What about the baby one?" asked Degore.

Father shook his head. "It was a male, what baby one?"

"I thought I saw it," Degore said. "I must have been seeing things, I was so scared."

Father patted his back. "You have done well helping protect the family. I will bring you out tomorrow and we will go over what your uncle and I did."

Degore snuggled down into the furs beside the fire. He drifted off watching his mother rocking the sister to sleep, and singing softly to her.

Degore woke up suddenly. He felt waves lapping at his feet. The tide was coming in. Degore jumped up with a start and ran full pelt across the stony beach towards Clancy, who was following Pawdraig around and poking him when his back was turned.

"Where have you been?" Clancy inquired.

Degore mumbled something and rubbed his eyes. He looked back the way he had come. He stared.

Something cold and wet slid down his ear.

"Clancy!" Degore cried out and turned upon his friend, who withdrew his finger quickly. They tussled with each other as Pawdraig ran around barking.

"Boys!" Freyja's voice stopped them. "Food!"

They rushed over, anticipating hot stew with beef and angelica herbs, with a slice of thick bread on the side.

As they munched on their food, Degore's mind went back to

his dream. The dream had been so vivid he felt a little upset. The faces of the unknown relations disturbed him. He felt a sad peace at the faces of the grandfather, grandmother and father as they slowly faded from his memory. Like his mother, he would love to know them, but he knew that they were gone from him forever.

The sister and uncle burned into his mind. He remembered his sister's laugh and the scar down the uncle's arm, but all other features were lost. He was sure that they were out there somewhere.

The stew was quickly eaten, and the boys went back to their play. Uhtred brought out a ball and together they all kicked it around on the beach. Pawdraig interfered as often as possible. Uhtred had fishing to do and after a time, he took himself off.

The sun was slowly sinking in the west and Clancy stood and watched the waves while Degore hurled rocks into the water. Pawdraig came over with a stick and Degore threw it for him. When he came back Degore threw it into the water this time. Pawdraig rushed in to fetch it. He threw it further. Pawdraig rushed into the water and then stopped and whined.

"It is too far in," Clancy said, "he doesn't want to swim to get it."

Degore approached the water's edge and dipped a toe in. It was very cold. The stick

bobbed in the water just ahead of him. He pulled up his trousers and went in further up to his knees and reached forwards and almost had the stick when a great wave rushed over him. He was pushed off his feet and he grabbed at nothing as he tumbled head over heels. The water got into his mouth and made him choke, it was salty and terrible.

He heard Clancy yelling and Pawdraig's barks for a second when another wave rushed over him. He gasped for air as the shock of the freezing water hit him but his mouth just filled with water again. Suddenly big hands grabbed him and he was pulled from the control of the waves. He came up coughing and spluttering. Uhtred was carrying him over to Freyja who stood by the fire.

"He is alright," Uhtred was saying to her, "just a little scared, I reckon."

Degore found himself wrapped in a blanket, and sitting by the fire. Uhtred held him close. "Can't have you drowning on your first trip away from the Abbey," he said.

Degore shivered. He noticed Clancy's worried face and Pawdraig whined a little.

A delicious scent filled the air. It was the soup Freyja was heating. She dished it out, and Degore found himself seated on a log beside Clancy munching and slurping away, feeling fine and

dandy. Pawdraig begged at their feet for a scrap.

“Who is St Carella?” Degore asked Freyja—he had been wondering for a while, but hadn’t seemed to be able to find the right time.

She smoothed back her dark hair. “He is who our Abbey is named after. He lived on the plateau many years ago, a simple sheep-herder. He fought off a wolf to save a child, and then the family gifted him some sheep as thanks. Unfortunately, amongst them was a ram, who promptly injured him. There was fighting in the village over this, and the child and her family were killed after St Carella was found dead of his injuries one morning.”

Clancy nodded along enthusiastically, “That’s why it’s called the Forbidden Plateau.”

“Yes,” Freyja nodded as she checked over some fish brought to her by Uhtred. “These are a good size.” She turned and watched, for a second, the fish being loaded onto the donkeys. “But back to the story: the Forbidden Plateau was

abandoned for centuries and no one went there until a royal visit from St Elizabeth just before her death; she set up the Abbey and dedicated it to St Carella. Now it is home to our order, and a pilgrimage destination for many travellers who wish to venerate the humble St Carella and travel in the footsteps of St Elizabeth.”

“I don’t know how he died from a sheep,” Clancy whispered to Degore who giggled.

“Who is Grudaire?” Degore asked Uhtred.

“How do you know of him?”

Degore explained and then added “he said one of these days he will come to the Abbey.”

Uhtred laughed. “He comes and goes, who knows when we will see him next.”

“I hope it is soon.” The dream flashed through his mind again and Degore decided the bay was a fine place to be. But he was determined to figure out how the waves worked before going into the water again.



Mulga Bill's Bicycle

'Twas Mulga Bill, from Eaglehawk, that caught the cycling craze;
He turned away the good old horse that served him many days;
He dressed himself in cycling clothes, resplendent to be seen;
He hurried off to town and bought a shining new machine;
And as he wheeled it through the door, with air of lordly pride,
The grinning shop assistant said, "Excuse me, can you ride?"

"See here, young man," said Mulga Bill, "from Walgett to the sea,
From Conroy's Gap to Castlereagh, there's none can ride like me.
I'm good all round at everything, as everybody knows,
Although I'm not the one to talk - I hate a man that blows.
But riding is my special gift, my chiefest, sole delight;
Just ask a wild duck can it swim, a wildcat can it fight.
There's nothing clothed in hair or hide, or built of flesh or steel,
There's nothing walks or jumps, or runs, on axle, hoof, or wheel,
But what I'll sit, while hide will hold and girths and straps are tight:
I'll ride this here two-wheeled concern right straight away at sight."

'Twas Mulga Bill, from Eaglehawk, that sought his own abode,
That perched above the Dead Man's Creek, beside the mountain road.
He turned the cycle down the hill and mounted for the fray,
But ere he'd gone a dozen yards it bolted clean away.
It left the track, and through the trees, just like a silver streak,
It whistled down the awful slope towards the Dead Man's Creek.

It shaved a stump by half an inch, it dodged a big white-box:
The very wallaroos in fright went scrambling up the rocks,
The wombats hiding in their caves dug deeper underground,
As Mulga Bill, as white as chalk, sat tight to every bound.
It struck a stone and gave a spring that cleared a fallen tree,
It raced beside a precipice as close as close could be;
And then as Mulga Bill let out one last despairing shriek
It made a leap of twenty feet into the Dead Man's Creek.

'Twas Mulga Bill from Eaglehawk, that slowly swam ashore:
He said, "I've had some narrer shaves and lively rides before;
I've rode a wild bull round a yard to win a five-pound bet,
But this was the most awful ride that I've encountered yet.
I'll give that two-wheeled outlaw best; It's shaken all my nerve
To feel it whistle through the air and plunge and buck and swerve.
It's safe at rest in Dead Man's Creek, we'll leave it lying still;
A horse's back is good enough henceforth for Mulga Bill."

-Banjo Patterson



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