



# CORNCRAKE

MAY 2024  
ISSUE 3

NESTING IN THE OAK OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE





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



## Editor's Note

I am pleased as punch with this third issue of the Corncrake, and I hope you, dear reader, share my joy.

It is with sadness that we must say goodbye to our friend Erika Olafsdottir, whose story comes to an end in this issue. This month's cover art pays tribute. But not to worry, ND Wallace Swan is not going anywhere and we are delighted to continue to work with him in upcoming issues.

Fans of dark tales will be pleased to see that this month HP Lovecraft is joined by his fellow chronicler of the unsettling, Algernon Blackwood, and, in the spirit of Victorian inventiveness, the tale of *Moxon's Master*. Also included is a fairy tale written by a new contributor, AR Duncan with *The Good King and His Daughter's Plea*. We have a short story by the prolific Agatha Christie, entitled *The Plymouth Express Affair*, and the third instalment of my own *Druid Without a Home*.

This issue is proud to be part of King Arthur Day. At Nathan CJ Hood's suggestion we present the writings of Geoffrey of Monmouthshire, concerning the legendary king. Nathan is hosting a day of celebration and remembrance of this legend of merry old England, and in this issue you will find instructions on how to join in.

**Call of the Shieldmaiden**  
Editor-in-Chief



# Erika Olafsdottir

# Conclusion

N.D. Wallace-Swan



“Er-Erika?” she muttered, “Is that you? Why do you look the same as when I last saw you? You haven’t aged a day in over five years! Where were you? Never mind that, come in come in, and you are...?”

“Thorgil, I was on a pilgrimage to the cave in the east. I spoke with your husband Harold recently I believe...”

“I doubt that,” replied Harpa. “I can assure you he is very unable to talk at the moment, on account of him having passed to the Lord.”

Thorgil became confused. He swore he spoke to Harold and Erika only a week or two ago, maximum.

Erika asked what had happened in these years, she didn’t understand. Had she been frozen in time? She never closed her eyes except to blink. Five years had passed? This didn’t make any sense to her, nor Thorgil.

Harpa detailed the past five years. Erika went missing, a search commenced and lasted for weeks, to no avail. Nearby settlements were checked, and nothing of note was learned. Everyone hoped she would someday return. Now that she had, it was even more confusing. Harold and Harpa’s first child Egil was born, though he was five now, born soon after Erika went missing.

Then Ólafur passed away about a year later, dying in his sleep. Harold found him. Harpa again became pregnant, and they needed help with the running of the farm, and a tenant farmer family with twin boys needed work and a place to live. They had been living with the wife’s parents in cramped quarters up until then. Soon Harpa gave birth to a girl, Elin, with beautiful blonde hair like her aunt Erika. She was a toddler now. Both children stood close to their mother while she spoke, glancing shyly towards their young aunt.

Harpa assured Erika that they were good people, especially since Harold passed away from the bloody flu last winter. That was another hit to Erika, that her brother was dead. She sort of couldn’t believe it. Harpa offered to take them all to the churchyard, to visit the graves and speak to Reverend Ketill.

They made their way to the Church and visited the graves. Ólafur was buried next to Asta and had a similar grave marker, hand-painted by the Reverend. She stared at the now mostly flat gravesite. Her nephew Egil grabbed her by the hand.

“Follow me, Auntie.” Egil leads Erika back to the church. They went inside and the Reverend was astonished to see her.

“Erika!?” he said. “What is this? Surely a miracle.” He gave her a strong hug, and Egil let go of her hand. “Where have you been? And who is this man... I recognize him... Thorgil, right? Forgive me, it has been some years and...”

“I remember you like it was yesterday, Reverend.” Thorgil interrupted.

“No, it has been some years I believe. You were in a cave, yes? How was your pilgrimage there? Did you find your spirit?” asked Ketill.

“Perhaps, Reverend. I see these people here, Erika and Harpa and the children, and they could use my help. I am a capable man and could probably help them run the farmstead. I don’t have a set schedule to return to Skaholt anyway. Perhaps I can make a call later. It appears the ewes are going to lamb. What do you say Harpa and Erika, could I be of help?”

Harpa thought for a moment, she thought about her struggle with the young children, and how it would be helpful to have some more hands around.

“If you are happy to help, we can set up the small barn to be nice and cosy for you to stay in. Not that we want you to feel degraded, but you know, it would not be proper for you to stay in the same house as me and the children.”

“I spent 5 years in a cave, a barn should be easy. If it was good enough for Our Lord, then it shall be good enough for lowly Thorgil.”

So it was that Thorgil came to live and help out on the farmstead. The brown lamb was bred into the flock, and over the years more brown lambs were born and began producing plentiful brown wool for the family to trade. Egil and Elin grew up to be strong and healthy. Eventually, as time went by, Harpa came to love Thorgil, and he no longer had to live in the barn. Soon they were married in the church by Reverend Ketill. They had a child together, which they named Harold.

Harold Thorgilsson eventually inherited the farm along with his brother and sisters Egil and Elin. They ran it together along with their Aunt Erika, who by this time lived in a nearby house of her own, newly built for her own family. She had married Gunni, and together they had a son, Thorvald. Erika always looked young for her age, five years younger to be exact. Although she was a good wife and mother, a dark cloud always hung in her mind. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a stone. It shone in many colours. It was the same one given to her by Thorgil when she was small, in that cave long ago. So much good had happened, so many windows had opened despite so many closed doors, and so much time had passed by since then. A thought haunted her, that she was never able to say goodbye to her parents.

“And yet I remember them.”

# History of the Kings of Britain

Book 10 Chapter 3

Geoffrey of Monmouth



CHAPTER III MEANWHILE tidings are brought unto Arthur that a certain giant of marvellous bigness hath arrived out of the parts of Spam, and, moreover, that he hath seized Helena, niece of Duke Hoel, out of the hands of them that had charge of her, and hath fled with her unto the top of the mount that is now called of Michael, whither the knights of the country had pursued him Howbeit, nought might they prevail against him, neither by sea noaby land, for when they would attack him, either he would sink their ships with hugeous rocks, or sky the men with javelins or other weapons, and, more-over, devour many half-alive Accordingly, in the following night at the second hour, he took with him Kay the Seneschal and Bedevere the Butler, and issuing forth of the tents, unknown to the others, started on his way towards the mount. For of such puissance was his own valour that he deigned not lead an army against such monsters, as holding himself singlyenow for their destruction, and being minded to spirit up his men to follow his ensample. Now, when they came amghthe mount, they espied a great fire of wood a-blazing there- io Ueotrey's Histories upon, and another smaller fire upon a smaller mount not faraway from the first. So, being m doubt which were the one whereupon the giant had his wone, they sent Bedevere tospy out the certainty of the matter He, therefore, finding a little boat, oared hun first unto the smaller mount, for none otherwise might he attain thereunto, seeing that it was set in the sea And when he began to climb up towards the top he heard above him the ullaloo of a woman wailing above him, and at first shuddered, for he misdoubted him the monster might be there But quickly recovering his hardihood, he drew his sword from the scabbard and mounted to the very top, whereon nought found he save the fire of wood they had espied But close thereby he saw a newly-made grave-mound, and beside it an old woman weeping and lamenting, who, so soon as she beheld him, stinted her tears forthwith and spake unto him on this wise " O, unhappy man, what evil doom hath brought thee unto this place 7O, thou that must endure the pangs unspeakable of death, woe is me for thee' Woe is me that a monster so accurst must this night consume the flower of thine youth 1 For that most foul and impious giant of execrable name

shall presently be here, that did carry hither unto this mount the niece of our Duke, whom I have but just now sithence bunedin this grave, and me, her nurse, along with her On what unheard of wise will he slay thee and tarry not' Alas for the sorrow and the doom\* This most queenly foster-child of mine own, swooning with terror when this abhorred monster would fain have embraced her, breathed forth thehfe that now can never know the longer day that it deserved' Ochone for mine other soul mine other life mine other sweetness of gladness' Flee thou, iqy beloved, flee, lest he find thee here, and rend thee limb from limb by a pitiable death ' " But Bedevere, moved to the heart deeply as heart of man may be moved, soothed her with words of comfort, and promising her such cheer as speedy succour might bring, returned unto Arthur and told him the story of what he had found Howbeit, Arthur, grieving over the damsel's hapless fate, bade them that they should allow him to attack the monster singly, but if need were should come unto his rescue and fall upon the giant like men They made then- way from thence unto the greater mount, and giving their horses in charge to their squires, began to climb the mount, Arthur Of the Kings of Britain 1 8going first. Just then that unnatural monster was by the fire, his chops all besmeared with the dotted blood of half eaten swine, the residue whereof he was toasting on spits over the live embers The moment he espied them, when nought was less in his thought, he hastened him to get hold of his club, which two young men could scarce have liftedl from the ground The King forthwith unsheathed his swordr and covering him with his shield, humed as swiftly as hurry he might to be beforehand with him, and prevent his getting hold of the club But the giant, not unaware of his intention, had already clutched it and smote the King upon the cover of his shield with such a buffet as that the sound of the stroke filled the whole shore, and did utterly deafen hisears But Arthur, thereupon blazing out into bitter wrath, lifted his sword and dealt him a wound upon his forehead, from whence the blood gushed forth over his face and eyes in such sort as well-nigh blinded his sight Howbeit, the blow was not deadl), for he had warded his forehead with his club in such wise as to scape being killed outright Xatheless, blinded as he was with the blood



welling forth, again he Cometh on more fierce!} than ever, and as a wild boar rusheth from his lay upon a huntsman, so thrust he in within the sweep of Arthur's sword, gripped him by the loins, and forced him to his knees upon the ground Howbeit, Arthur, nothing daunted, soon slipped from out his clutches, and swiftly bestirring him with his sword, hacked the accursed monster first in one place and then in another, and gave him no respite until at last he smote him a deadly buffet on the head, and burned the whole breadth of his sword in his brain-pan The abhorred beast roared aloud and dropped with a mighty crash like an oak torn up by the roots in the fury of the winds Thereupon the King brake out on laughing, bidding Bedevere strike off his bead and give it to one of the squires to carry to the camp as a rareeshow for sightseers Natheless, he bade that they who came to look upon it should keep their tongues quiet, inasmuch as never had he forgathered with none other of so puissanthardihood since he slew the giant Ritho upon Mount Eryn, that had challenged him to fight with him For this Rithohad fashioned him a furred cloak of the beards of the king she had slam, and he had bidden Arthur heedfully to flay off his beard and send it unto him with the skin, in which case. 1 82 Geoffrey's Histories seeing that Arthur did excel other kings, he would sew it in his honour above the other beards on his cloak. Howbeit, in case he refused, he challenged him to fight upon such covenant, that he which should prove the better man of thetwam should have the other's beard as well as the furred cloak. So when it came to the scratch Arthur had the best of it and earned off Ritho's beard and his cloak, and sithence that tune had never had to do with none so strong until helighted upon this one, as he is above reported as assertingAfter he had won this victory as I have said, they returned just after daybreak to then- tents with the head, crowds coming running up to look upon it and praising the valour of the man that had delivered the country from so insatiable a man But Hoel, grieving over the loss of his niece, bade build a church above her body upon the mount where she lay, the which was named after the dams



## AUTOMATION

America has fallen.

Her states divided into haves and have nots. The East, a shell of its former glory, ravaged by a terrorist attack that has left them in darkness and now lead by Deluge Worldwide, the largest corporation on Earth. The West, a functioning society built on progressive values and looking to export their ideals back East.

Get it on  
AMAZON  
and KINDLE!

# King Arthur Day

Hosted by Nathan CJ Hood

For over a thousand years tales of Arthur, King of the Britons, have been told. He has captured the imaginations of Celtic warriors, crusading knights, medieval monks, restoration composers, Victorian artists and modern rock stars.

His is a living tradition that reaches into the depths of the human experience and the spirit of the magical Britannic isles.

Great creators have come on board to explore Arthur in art, film, music, politics and religion, both in the form of analysis and in terms of original creative contributions. We explore and celebrate Arthuriana, providing a full day of videos and livestreams.

**We will look back while awaiting return of Arthur in the future!**

The full schedule will be published on the Youtube channel:

**Nathan CJ Hood**

If you would like to contribute, contact on X/Twitter:

**@NathanCJHood**

For the Once and Future King!

**25th May 2024**



# The Music of Erich Zann

H.P. Lovecraft



It has always been the prerogative of genius to batter on the portals of the Unknowable—and then thrust his soul into the crack, like the little Dutch boy, to keep the devil out. The Satanic legends surrounding the unbelievable career of the great concertist, Paganini, leave little doubt that somewhere there is a window such as Erich Zann's, beyond which lies a world more terrible than imagination can grasp, where science dwindles to zero and incredible passions rage as winds in a vacuum. Where? Why, on the Rue d'Auseil—which no one visits twice. . . .

I HAVE examined maps of the city with the greatest care, yet have never again found the Rue d'Auseil. These maps have not been modern maps alone, for I know that names change. I have, on the contrary, delved deeply into all the antiquities of the place, and have personally explored every region, of whatever name, which could possibly answer to the street I knew as the Rue d'Auseil. But despite all I have done, it remains an humiliating fact that I cannot find the house, the street, or even the locality, where, during the last months of my impoverished life as a student of metaphysics at the university, I heard the music of Erich Zann.

That my memory is broken, I do not wonder; for my health, physical and mental, was gravely disturbed throughout the period of my residence in the Rue d'Auseil, and I recall that I took none of my few acquaintances there. But that I cannot find the place again is both singular and perplexing; for it was within a half-hour's walk of the university and was distinguished by peculiarities which could hardly be forgotten by anyone who had been there. I have never met a person who has seen the Rue d'Auseil.

The Rue d'Auseil lay across a dark river bordered by precipitous brick blear-windowed warehouses and spanned by a ponderous bridge of dark stone. It was always shadowy along that river, as if the smoke of neighboring factories shut out the sun perpetually. The river was also odorous with evil stench which I have never smelled elsewhere, and which may some day help me to find it, since I should recognize them at once. Beyond the bridge were narrow cobbled streets with rails; and then came the ascent, at first gradual, but incredibly steep as the Rue d'Auseil was reached.

I have never seen another street as narrow and steep as the Rue d'Auseil. It was almost a cliff,

closed to all vehicles, consisting in several places of flights of steps, and ending at the top in a lofty ivied wall. Its paving was irregular, sometimes stone slabs, sometimes cobblestones, and sometimes bare earth with struggling greenish-grey vegetation. The houses were tall, peaked-roofed, incredibly old, and crazily leaning backward, forward, and sidewise.

Occasionally an opposite pair, both leaning forward, almost met across the street like an arch; and certainly they kept most of the light from the ground below. There were a few overhead bridges from house to house across the street.

The inhabitants of that street impressed me peculiarly. At first I thought it was because they were all silent and reticent; but later decided it was because they were all very old. I do not know how I came to live on such a street, but I was not myself when I moved there. I had been living in many poor places, always evicted for want of money; until at last I came upon that tottering house in the Rue d'Auseil kept by the paralytic Blandot. It was the third house from the top of the street, and by far the tallest of them all.

My room was on the fifth story; the only inhabited room there, since the house was almost empty. On the night I arrived I heard strange music from the peaked garret overhead, and the next day asked old Blandot about it. He told me it was an old German viol-player, a strange dumb man who signed his name as Erich Zann, and who played evenings in a cheap theater orchestra; adding that Zann's desire to play in the night after his return from the theater was the reason he had chosen this lofty and isolated garret room, whose single gable window was the only point on the street from which one could look over the terminating wall at the declivity and panorama beyond.

Thereafter I heard Zann every night, and although he kept me awake, I was haunted by the weirdness of his music. Knowing little of the art myself, I was yet certain that none of his harmonies had any relation to music I had heard before; and concluded that he was a composer of highly original genius. The longer I listened, the more I was fascinated, until after a week I resolved to make the old man's acquaintance.

One night as he was returning from his work, I intercepted Zann in the hallway and told him that I would like to know him and be with him when he played. He was a small, lean, bent

person, with shabby clothes, blue eyes, grotesque, satyr-like face, and nearly bald head; and at my first words seemed both angered and frightened. My obvious friendliness, however, finally melted him; and he grudgingly motioned me to follow him up the dark, creaking and rickety attic stairs.

His room, one of only two in the steeply pitched garret, was on the west side, toward the high wall that formed the upper end of the street. Its size was very great, and seemed the greater because of its extraordinary barrenness and neglect. Of furniture there was only a narrow iron bedstead, a dingy wash-stand, a small table, a large bookcase, an iron music-rack, and three old-fashioned chairs. Sheets of music were piled in disorder about the floor. Evidently Erich Zann's world of beauty lay in some far cosmos of the imagination.

Motioning me to sit down, the dumb man closed the door, turned the large wooden bolt, and lighted a candle to augment the one he had brought with him. He now removed his viol from its moth-eaten covering, and taking it, seated himself in the least uncomfortable of the chairs. He did not employ the music-rack, but, offering no choice and playing from memory, enchanted me for over an hour with strains I had never heard before; strains which must have been of his own devising. To describe their exact nature is impossible for one unversed in music. They were a kind of fugue, with recurrent passage of the most captivating quality, but to me were notable for the absence of any of the weird notes I had overhead from my room below on other occasions.

THOSE HAUNTING notes I had remembered, and had often hummed and whistled inaccurately to myself, so when the player at length laid down his bow I asked him if he would render some of them. As I began my request the wrinkled satyr-like face lost the bored placidity it had possessed during the playing, and seemed to show the same curious mixture of anger and fright which I had noticed when first I accosted the old man. For a moment I was inclined to use persuasion, regarding rather lightly the whims of senility; and even tried to awaken my host's weirder mood by whistling a few of the strains to which I had listened the night before.

But I did not pursue this course for more than a moment; for when the dumb musician recognized the whistled air his face grew

suddenly distorted with an expression wholly beyond analysis, and his long, cold, bony right hand reached out to stop my mouth and silence the crude imitation. As he did this he further demonstrated his eccentricity by casting a startled glance toward the lone curtained window, as if fearful of some intruder—a glance doubly absurd, since the garret stood high and inaccessible above all the adjacent roofs, this window being the only point on the steep street, as the concierge had told me, from which one could see over the wall at the summit.

The old man's glance brought Blandot's remark to my mind, and with a certain capriciousness I felt a wish to look out over the wide and dizzying panorama of moonlit roofs and city lights beyond the hilltop, which of all the dwellers in the Rue d'Auseil, only this crabbed musician could see. I moved toward the window and would have drawn aside the nondescript curtains, when with a frightened rage even greater than before, the dumb lodger was upon me again; this time motioning with his head toward the door as he nervously strove to drag me thither with both hands. Now thoroughly disgusted with my host, I ordered him to release me, and told him I would go at once. His clutch relaxed, and as he saw my disgust and offense, his own anger seemed to subside. He tightened his relaxing grip, but this time in a friendly manner, forcing me into a chair; then with an appearance of wistfulness crossing to the littered table, where he wrote many words with a pencil, in the labored French of a foreigner.

The note which he finally handed me was an appeal for tolerance and forgiveness. Zann said that he was old, lonely, and afflicted with strange fears and nervous disorders connected with his music and with other things. He had enjoyed my listening to his music, and wished I would come again and not mind his eccentricities. But he could not play to another his weird harmonies, and could not bear hearing them from another; nor could he bear having anything in his room touched by another. He had not known until our hallway conversation that I could overhear his playing in my room, and now asked me if I would arrange with Blandot to take a lower room where I could not hear him in the night. He would defray the difference in rent.

As I sat deciphering the execrable French, I felt more lenient toward the old man. So when

I had finished reading, I shook my host by the hand, and departed as a friend.

The next day Blandot gave me a more expensive room on the third floor.

There was no one on the fourth floor.

It was not long before I found that Zann's eagerness for my company was not as great as it had seemed while he was persuading me to move down from the fifth story. He did not ask me to call on him, and when I did call he appeared uneasy and played listlessly. This was always at night—in the day he slept and would admit no one. My liking for him did not grow, though the attic room and the weird music seemed to hold an odd fascination for me. I had a curious desire to look out of that window, over the wall and down the unseen slope.

What I did succeed in doing was to overhear the nocturnal playing of the dumb old man. At first I would tip-toe up to my old fifth floor, then I grew bold enough to climb the last creaking staircase to the peaked garret. There in the narrow hall, outside the bolted door with the covered keyhole, I often heard sounds which filled me with an indefinable dread—the dread of vague wonder and brooding mystery. It was not that the sounds were hideous, for they were not; but that they held vibrations suggesting nothing on this globe of earth, and that at certain intervals they assumed a symphonic quality which I could hardly conceive as produced by one player.

Then one night as I listened at the door, I heard the shrieking viol swell into a chaotic babel of sound; a pandemonium which would have led me to doubt my own shaking sanity had there not come from behind that barred portal a piteous proof that the horror was real—the awful, inarticulate cry which only a mute can utter, and which rises only in moments of the most terrible fear or anguish. I knocked repeatedly at the door, but received no response. Afterward I waited in the black hallway, shivering with cold and fear, till I heard the poor musician's feeble effort to rise from the floor by the aid of a chair. Believing him just conscious after a fainting fit, I renewed my rapping, at the same time calling out my name reassuringly. I heard Zann stumble to the window and close both shutter and sash, then stumble to the door, which he falteringly unfastened to admit me. This time his delight at having me present was real.

Shaking pathetically, the old man forced me into a chair whilst he sank into another, beside

which his viol and bow lay carelessly on the floor. He sat for some time inactive, nodding oddly, but having a paradoxical suggestion of intense and frightened listening. Subsequently he seemed to be satisfied, and crossing to a chair by the table wrote a brief note, handed it to me, and returning to the table, where he began to write rapidly and incessantly. The note implored me in the name of mercy, to wait where I was while he prepared a full account in German of all the marvels and terrors which beset him. I waited, and the dumb man's pencil flew.

IT WAS perhaps an hour later, while I still waited and while the old musician's feverishly written sheets still continued to pile up, that I saw Zann start as from the hint of a horrible shock. Unmistakably he was looking at the curtained window and listening shudderingly. Then I half fancied I heard a sound myself; though it was not a horrible sound, but rather an exquisitely low and infinitely distant musical note, suggesting a player in one of the neighboring houses, or in some abode beyond the lofty wall over which I had never been able to look. Upon Zann the effect was terrible, for, dropping his pencil, suddenly he rose, seized his viol, and commenced to rend the night with the wildest playing I had ever heard from his bow save when listening at the barred door.

It would be useless to describe the playing of Erich Zann on that dreadful night. It was more horrible than anything I had ever overheard, because I could not see the expression of his face, and could realize that this time the motive was stark fear. He was trying to make a noise; to ward something off or drown something out—what, I could not imagine, awesome though I felt it must be. The playing grew fantastic, delirious, and hysterical, yet kept to the last the qualities of supreme genius which I know this strange old man possessed. I recognized the air—it was a wild Hungarian dance popular in the theaters.

Louder and louder, wilder and wilder, mounted the shrieking and whining of that desperate viol. The player was dripping with an uncanny perspiration and twisted like a monkey, always looking frantically at the curtained window. In his frenzied strains I could almost see shadowy satyrs and bacchanals dancing and whirling insanely through seething abysses of clouds and smoke and lightning. And then I thought I heard a shriller, steadier note that was

not from the viol; a calm, deliberate, purposeful, mocking note from far away in the west.

At this juncture the shutter began to rattle in a howling night wind which had sprung up outside as if in answer to the mad playing within. Zann's screaming viol now outdid itself emitting sound I had never thought a viol could emit. The shutter rattled more loudly, unfastened, and commenced slamming against the window. Then the glass broke shiveringly under the persistent impacts, and the chill wind rushed in, making the candles sputter and rustling the sheets of paper on the table where Zann had begun to write out his horrible secret. I looked at Zann, and saw that he was past conscious observation. His blue eyes were bulging, glassy and sightless, and the frantic playing had become a blind, mechanical unrecognizable orgy that no pen could even suggest.

A sudden gust, stronger than the others, caught up the manuscript and bore it toward the window. I followed the flying sheets in desperation, but they were gone before I reached the demolished panes. Then I remembered my old wish to gaze from this window, the only window in the Rue d'Auseil from which one might see the slope beyond the wall, and the city outspread beneath. It was very dark, but the city's lights always burned, and I expected to see them there amidst the rain and wind. Yet when I looked from that highest of all gable windows, looked while the candles sputtered and the insane viol howled with the night-wind, I saw no city spread below, and no friendly lights gleamed from remembered streets, but only the blackness of space illimitable; unimagined space alive with motion and music, and having no semblance of anything on earth. And as I stood there looking in terror, the wind blew out both the candles in that ancient peaked garret, leaving me in savage and impenetrable darkness with chaos and pandemonium before me, and the demon madness of that night-baying viol behind me.

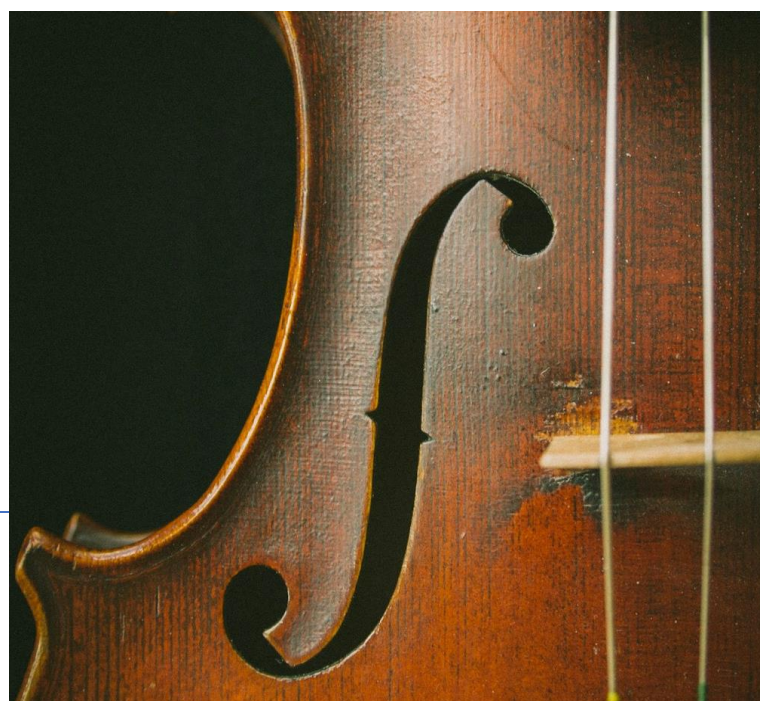
I staggered back in the dark, without the means of striking a light, crashing against the table, overturning a chair, and finally groping my way to the place where the blackness screamed with shocking music. To save myself and Erich Zann I could at least try, whatever the powers opposed to me. Once I thought some chill thing brushed me, and I screamed, but my scream could not be heard above the hideous viol. Suddenly out of the blackness the madly sawing

bow struck me, and I knew I was close to the player. I felt ahead, touched the back of Zann's chair, and then found and shook his shoulder.

He did not respond, and still the viol shrieked on without slackening. I moved my hand to his head, whose mechanical nodding I was able to stop, and shouted in his ear that we must both flee from the unknown things of the night. But he neither answered me nor abated the frenzy of his unutterable music, while all through the garret strange currents of wind seemed to dance in the darkness and babel. When my hand touched his ear I shuddered, though I knew not why—knew not why till I felt of the still face; the ice-cold, stiffened, unbreathing face whose glassy eyes bulged uselessly into the void. And then, by some miracle, finding the door and the large wooden bolt, I plunged wildly away from that glassy-eyed thing in the dark, and from the ghoulish howling of that accursed viol whose fury increased even as I plunged.

Leaping, floating, flying down those endless stairs through the dark house; racing mindlessly out into the narrow, steep, and ancient street of steps and tottering houses; clattering down steps and over cobbles to the lower streets and the putrid canyon-walled river; panting across the great dark bridge to the broader, healthier streets and boulevards we know; all these are terrible impressions that linger with me. And I recall that there was no wind, and that the moon was out, and that all the lights of the city twinkled.

Despite my most careful searches and investigations, I have never since been able to find the Rue d'Auseil. But I am not wholly sorry; either for this or for the loss in undreamable abysses of the closely-written sheets which alone could have explained the music of Erich Zann



# The Wood of the Dead

Algernon Blackwood





One summer, in my wanderings with a knapsack, I was at luncheon in the room of a wayside inn in the western country, when the door opened and there entered an old rustic, who crossed close to my end of the table and sat himself down very quietly in the seat by the bow window. We exchanged glances, or, properly speaking, nods, for at the moment I did not actually raise my eyes to his face, so concerned was I with the important business of satisfying an appetite gained by tramping twelve miles over a difficult country.

The fine warm rain of seven o'clock, which had since risen in a kind of luminous mist about the tree tops, now floated far overhead in a deep blue sky, and the day was settling down into a blaze of golden light. It was one of those days peculiar to Somerset and North Devon, when the orchards shine and the meadows seem to add a radiance of their own, so brilliantly soft are the colourings of grass and foliage.

The inn-keeper's daughter, a little maiden with a simple country loveliness, presently entered with a foaming pewter mug, enquired after my welfare, and went out again. Apparently she had not noticed the old man sitting in the settle by the bow window, nor had he, for his part, so much as once turned his head in our direction.

Under ordinary circumstances I should probably have given no thought to this other occupant of the room; but the fact that it was supposed to be reserved for my private use, and the singular thing that he sat looking aimlessly out of the window, with no attempt to engage me in conversation, drew my eyes more than once somewhat curiously upon him, and I soon caught myself wondering why he sat there so silently, and always with averted head.

He was, I saw, a rather bent old man in rustic dress, and the skin of his face was wrinkled like that of an apple; corduroy trousers were caught up with a string below the knee, and he wore a sort of brown fustian jacket that was very much faded. His thin hand rested upon a stoutish stick. He wore no hat and carried none, and I noticed that his head, covered with silvery hair, was finely shaped and gave the impression of something noble.

Though rather piqued by his studied disregard of my presence, I came to the conclusion that he probably had something to do with the little hostel and had a perfect right to use this room with freedom, and I finished my luncheon without breaking the silence and then

took the settle opposite to smoke a pipe before going on my way.

Through the open window came the scents of the blossoming fruit trees; the orchard was drenched in sunshine and the branches danced lazily in the breeze; the grass below fairly shone with white and yellow daisies, and the red roses climbing in profusion over the casement mingled their perfume with the sweetly penetrating odour of the sea.

It was a place to dawdle in, to lie and dream away a whole afternoon, watching the sleepy butterflies and listening to the chorus of birds which seemed to fill every corner of the sky. Indeed, I was already debating in my mind whether to linger and enjoy it all instead of taking the strenuous pathway over the hills, when the old rustic in the settle opposite suddenly turned his face towards me for the first time and began to speak.

His voice had a quiet dreamy note in it that was quite in harmony with the day and the scene, but it sounded far away, I thought, almost as though it came to me from outside where the shadows were weaving their eternal tissue of dreams upon the garden floor. Moreover, there was no trace in it of the rough quality one might naturally have expected, and, now that I saw the full face of the speaker for the first time, I noted with something like a start that the deep, gentle eyes seemed far more in keeping with the timbre of the voice than with the rough and very countrified appearance of the clothes and manner. His voice set pleasant waves of sound in motion towards me, and the actual words, if I remember rightly, were--

"You are a stranger in these parts?" or "Is not this part of the country strange to you?"

There was no "sir," nor any outward and visible sign of the deference usually paid by real country folk to the town-bred visitor, but in its place a gentleness, almost a sweetness, of polite sympathy that was far more of a compliment than either.

I answered that I was wandering on foot through a part of the country that was wholly new to me, and that I was surprised not to find a place of such idyllic loveliness marked upon my map.

"I have lived here all my life," he said, with a sigh, "and am never tired of coming back to it again."

"Then you no longer live in the immediate neighbourhood?"

"I have moved," he answered briefly, adding after a pause in which his eyes seemed to

wander wistfully to the wealth of blossoms beyond the window; "but I am almost sorry, for nowhere else have I found the sunshine lie so warmly, the flowers smell so sweetly, or the winds and streams make such tender music. . . ."

His voice died away into a thin stream of sound that lost itself in the rustle of the rose-leaves climbing in at the window, for he turned his head away from me as he spoke and looked out into the garden. But it was impossible to conceal my surprise, and I raised my eyes in frank astonishment on hearing so poetic an utterance from such a figure of a man, though at the same time realising that it was not in the least inappropriate, and that, in fact, no other sort of expression could have properly been expected from him.

"I am sure you are right," I answered at length, when it was clear he had ceased speaking; "or there is something of enchantment here--of real fairy-like enchantment--that makes me think of the visions of childhood days, before one knew anything of--of--"

I had been oddly drawn into his vein of speech, some inner force compelling me. But here the spell passed and I could not catch the thoughts that had a moment before opened a long vista before my inner vision.

"To tell you the truth," I concluded lamely, "the place fascinates me and I am in two minds about going further--"

Even at this stage I remember thinking it odd that I should be talking like this with a stranger whom I met in a country inn, for it has always been one of my failings that to strangers my manner is brief to surliness. It was as though we were figures meeting in a dream, speaking without sound, obeying laws not operative in the everyday working world, and about to play with a new scale of space and time perhaps. But my astonishment passed quickly into an entirely different feeling when I became aware that the old man opposite had turned his head from the window again, and was regarding me with eyes so bright they seemed almost to shine with an inner flame. His gaze was fixed upon my face with an intense ardour, and his whole manner had suddenly become alert and concentrated. There was something about him I now felt for the first time that made little thrills of excitement run up and down my back. I met his look squarely, but with an inward tremor.

"Stay, then, a little while longer," he said in a much lower and deeper voice than before; "stay,

and I will teach you something of the purpose of my coming."

He stopped abruptly. I was conscious of a decided shiver.

"You have a special purpose then--in coming back?" I asked, hardly knowing what I was saying.

"To call away someone," he went on in the same thrilling voice, "someone who is not quite ready to come, but who is needed elsewhere for a worthier purpose." There was a sadness in his manner that mystified me more than ever.

"You mean--?" I began, with an unaccountable access of trembling.

"I have come for someone who must soon move, even as I have moved."

He looked me through and through with a dreadfully piercing gaze, but I met his eyes with a full straight stare, trembling though I was, and I was aware that something stirred within me that had never stirred before, though for the life of me I could not have put a name to it, or have analysed its nature. Something lifted and rolled away. For one single second I understood clearly that the past and the future exist actually side by side in one immense Present; that it was I who moved to and fro among shifting, protean appearances.

The old man dropped his eyes from my face, and the momentary glimpse of a mightier universe passed utterly away. Reason regained its sway over a dull, limited kingdom.

"Come to-night," I heard the old man say, "come to me to-night into the Wood of the Dead. Come at midnight--"

Involuntarily I clutched the arm of the settle for support, for I then felt that I was speaking with someone who knew more of the real things that are and will be, than I could ever know while in the body, working through the ordinary channels of sense--and this curious half-promise of a partial lifting of the veil had its undeniable effect upon me.

The breeze from the sea had died away outside, and the blossoms were still. A yellow butterfly floated lazily past the window. The song of the birds hushed--I smelt the sea--I smelt the perfume of heated summer air rising from fields and flowers, the ineffable scents of June and of the long days of the year--and with it, from countless green meadows beyond, came the hum of myriad summer life, children's voices, sweet pipings, and the sound of water falling.

I knew myself to be on the threshold of a new order of experience--of an ecstasy. Something drew me forth with a sense of

inexpressible yearning towards the being of this strange old man in the window seat, and for a moment I knew what it was to taste a mighty and wonderful sensation, and to touch the highest pinnacle of joy I have ever known. It lasted for less than a second, and was gone; but in that brief instant of time the same terrible lucidity came to me that had already shown me how the past and future exist in the present, and I realised and understood that pleasure and pain are one and the same force, for the joy I had just experienced included also all the pain I ever had felt, or ever could feel. . . .

The sunshine grew to dazzling radiance, faded, passed away. The shadows paused in their dance upon the grass, deepened a moment, and then melted into air. The flowers of the fruit trees laughed with their little silvery laughter as the wind sighed over their radiant eyes the old, old tale of its personal love. Once or twice a voice called my name. A wonderful sensation of lightness and power began to steal over me.

Suddenly the door opened and the inn-keeper's daughter came in. By all ordinary standards, her's was a charming country loveliness, born of the stars and wild-flowers, of moonlight shining through autumn mists upon the river and the fields; yet, by contrast with the higher order of beauty I had just momentarily been in touch with, she seemed almost ugly. How dull her eyes, how thin her voice, how vapid her smile, and insipid her whole presentment.

For a moment she stood between me and the occupant of the window seat while I counted out the small change for my meal and for her services; but when, an instant later, she moved aside, I saw that the settle was empty and that there was no longer anyone in the room but our two selves.

This discovery was no shock to me; indeed, I had almost expected it, and the man had gone just as a figure goes out of a dream, causing no surprise and leaving me as part and parcel of the same dream without breaking of continuity. But, as soon as I had paid my bill and thus resumed in very practical fashion the thread of my normal consciousness, I turned to the girl and asked her if she knew the old man who had been sitting in the window seat, and what he had meant by the Wood of the Dead.

The maiden started visibly, glancing quickly round the empty room, but answering simply that she had seen no one. I described him in great detail, and then, as the description grew clearer, she turned a little pale under her pretty

sunborn and said very gravely that it must have been the ghost.

"Ghost! What ghost?"

"Oh, the village ghost," she said quietly, coming closer to my chair with a little nervous movement of genuine alarm, and adding in a lower voice, "He comes before a death, they say!"

It was not difficult to induce the girl to talk, and the story she told me, shorn of the superstition that had obviously gathered with the years round the memory of a strangely picturesque figure, was an interesting and peculiar one.

The inn, she said, was originally a farmhouse, occupied by a yeoman farmer, evidently of a superior, if rather eccentric, character, who had been very poor until he reached old age, when a son died suddenly in the Colonies and left him an unexpected amount of money, almost a fortune.

The old man thereupon altered no whit his simple manner of living, but devoted his income entirely to the improvement of the village and to the assistance of its inhabitants; he did this quite regardless of his personal likes and dislikes, as if one and all were absolutely alike to him, objects of a genuine and impersonal benevolence. People had always been a little afraid of the man, not understanding his eccentricities, but the simple force of this love for humanity changed all that in a very short space of time; and before he died he came to be known as the Father of the Village and was held in great love and veneration by all.

A short time before his end, however, he began to act queerly. He spent his money just as usefully and wisely, but the shock of sudden wealth after a life of poverty, people said, had unsettled his mind. He claimed to see things that others did not see, to hear voices, and to have visions. Evidently, he was not of the harmless, foolish, visionary order, but a man of character and of great personal force, for the people became divided in their opinions, and the vicar, good man, regarded and treated him as a "special case." For many, his name and atmosphere became charged almost with a spiritual influence that was not of the best. People quoted texts about him; kept when possible out of his way, and avoided his house after dark. None understood him, but though the majority loved him, an element of dread and mystery became associated with his name, chiefly owing to the ignorant gossip of the few.

A grove of pine trees behind the farm--the girl pointed them out to me on the slope of the hill--he said was the Wood of the Dead, because just before anyone died in the village he saw them walk into that wood, singing. None who went in ever came out again. He often mentioned the names to his wife, who usually published them to all the inhabitants within an hour of her husband's confidence; and it was found that the people he had seen enter the wood--died. On warm summer nights he would sometimes take an old stick and wander out, hatless, under the pines, for he loved this wood, and used to say he met all his old friends there, and would one day walk in there never to return. His wife tried to break him gently off this habit, but he always had his own way; and once, when she followed and found him standing under a great pine in the thickest portion of the grove, talking earnestly to someone she could not see, he turned and rebuked her very gently, but in such a way that she never repeated the experiment, saying--

"You should never interrupt me, Mary, when I am talking with the others; for they teach me, remember, wonderful things, and I must learn all I can before I go to join them."

This story went like wild-fire through the village, increasing with every repetition, until at length everyone was able to give an accurate description of the great veiled figures the woman declared she had seen moving among the trees where her husband stood. The innocent pine-grove now became positively haunted, and the title of "Wood of the Dead" clung naturally as if it had been applied to it in the ordinary course of events by the compilers of the Ordnance Survey.

On the evening of his ninetieth birthday the old man went up to his wife and kissed her. His manner was loving, and very gentle, and there was something about him besides, she declared afterwards, that made her slightly in awe of him and feel that he was almost more of a spirit than a man.

He kissed her tenderly on both cheeks, but his eyes seemed to look right through her as he spoke.

"Dearest wife," he said, "I am saying good-bye to you, for I am now going into the Wood of the Dead, and I shall not return. Do not follow me, or send to search, but be ready soon to come upon the same journey yourself."

The good woman burst into tears and tried to hold him, but he easily slipped from her hands, and she was afraid to follow him. Slowly she saw him cross the field in the sunshine, and

then enter the cool shadows of the grove, where he disappeared from her sight.

That same night, much later, she woke to find him lying peacefully by her side in bed, with one arm stretched out towards her, dead. Her story was half believed, half doubted at the time, but in a very few years afterwards it evidently came to be accepted by all the countryside. A funeral service was held to which the people flocked in great numbers, and everyone approved of the sentiment which led the widow to add the words, "The Father of the Village," after the usual texts which appeared upon the stone over his grave.

This, then, was the story I pieced together of the village ghost as the little inn-keeper's daughter told it to me that afternoon in the parlour of the inn.

"But you're not the first to say you've seen him," the girl concluded; "and your description is just what we've always heard, and that window, they say, was just where he used to sit and think, and think, when he was alive, and sometimes, they say, to cry for hours together."

"And would you feel afraid if you had seen him?" I asked, for the girl seemed strangely moved and interested in the whole story.

"I think so," she answered timidly. "Surely, if he spoke to me. He did speak to you, didn't he, sir?" she asked after a slight pause.

"He said he had come for someone."

"Come for someone," she repeated. "Did he say--" she went on falteringly.

"No, he did not say for whom," I said quickly, noticing the sudden shadow on her face and the tremulous voice.

"Are you really sure, sir?"

"Oh, quite sure," I answered cheerfully. "I did not even ask him." The girl looked at me steadily for nearly a whole minute as though there were many things she wished to tell me or to ask. But she said nothing, and presently picked up her tray from the table and walked slowly out of the room.

Instead of keeping to my original purpose and pushing on to the next village over the hills, I ordered a room to be prepared for me at the inn, and that afternoon I spent wandering about the fields and lying under the fruit trees, watching the white clouds sailing out over the sea. The Wood of the Dead I surveyed from a distance, but in the village I visited the stone erected to the memory of the "Father of the Village"--who was thus, evidently, no mythical personage--and saw also the monuments of his fine unselfish spirit: the

schoolhouse he built, the library, the home for the aged poor, and the tiny hospital.

That night, as the clock in the church tower was striking half-past eleven, I stealthily left the inn and crept through the dark orchard and over the hayfield in the direction of the hill whose southern slope was clothed with the Wood of the Dead. A genuine interest impelled me to the adventure, but I also was obliged to confess to a certain sinking in my heart as I stumbled along over the field in the darkness, for I was approaching what might prove to be the birth-place of a real country myth, and a spot already lifted by the imaginative thoughts of a considerable number of people into the region of the haunted and ill-omened.

The inn lay below me, and all round it the village clustered in a soft black shadow unrelieved by a single light. The night was moonless, yet distinctly luminous, for the stars crowded the sky. The silence of deep slumber was everywhere; so still, indeed, that every time my foot kicked against a stone I thought the sound must be heard below in the village and waken the sleepers.

I climbed the hill slowly, thinking chiefly of the strange story of the noble old man who had seized the opportunity to do good to his fellows the moment it came his way, and wondering why the causes that operate ceaselessly behind human life did not always select such admirable instruments. Once or twice a night-bird circled swiftly over my head, but the bats had long since gone to rest, and there was no other sign of life stirring.

Then, suddenly, with a singular thrill of emotion, I saw the first trees of the Wood of the Dead rise in front of me in a high black wall. Their crests stood up like giant spears against the starry sky; and though there was no perceptible movement of the air on my cheek I heard a faint, rushing sound among their branches as the night breeze passed to and fro over their countless little needles. A remote, hushed murmur rose overhead and died away again almost immediately; for in these trees the wind seems to be never absolutely at rest, and on the calmest day there is always a sort of whispering music among their branches.

For a moment I hesitated on the edge of this dark wood, and listened intently. Delicate perfumes of earth and bark stole out to meet me. Impenetrable darkness faced me. Only the consciousness that I was obeying an order, strangely given, and including a mighty privilege,

enabled me to find the courage to go forward and step in boldly under the trees.

Instantly the shadows closed in upon me and "something" came forward to meet me from the centre of the darkness. It would be easy enough to meet my imagination half-way with fact, and say that a cold hand grasped my own and led me by invisible paths into the unknown depths of the grove; but at any rate, without stumbling, and always with the positive knowledge that I was going straight towards the desired object, I pressed on confidently and securely into the wood. So dark was it that, at first, not a single star-beam pierced the roof of branches overhead; and, as we moved forward side by side, the trees shifted silently past us in long lines, row upon row, squadron upon squadron, like the units of a vast, soundless army.

And, at length, we came to a comparatively open space where the trees halted upon us for a while, and, looking up, I saw the white river of the sky beginning to yield to the influence of a new light that now seemed spreading swiftly across the heavens.

"It is the dawn coming," said the voice at my side that I certainly recognised, but which seemed almost like a whispering from the trees, "and we are now in the heart of the Wood of the Dead."

We seated ourselves on a moss-covered boulder and waited the coming of the sun. With marvellous swiftness, it seemed to me, the light in the east passed into the radiance of early morning, and when the wind awoke and began to whisper in the tree tops, the first rays of the risen sun fell between the trunks and rested in a circle of gold at our feet.

"Now, come with me," whispered my companion in the same deep voice, "for time has no existence here, and that which I would show you is already there!"

We trod gently and silently over the soft pine needles. Already the sun was high over our heads, and the shadows of the trees coiled closely about their feet. The wood became denser again, but occasionally we passed through little open bits where we could smell the hot sunshine and the dry, baked pine needles. Then, presently, we came to the edge of the grove, and I saw a hayfield lying in the blaze of day, and two horses basking lazily with switching tails in the shafts of a laden hay-waggon.

So complete and vivid was the sense of reality, that I remember the grateful realisation of

the cool shade where we sat and looked out upon the hot world beyond.

The last pitchfork had tossed up its fragrant burden, and the great horses were already straining in the shafts after the driver, as he walked slowly in front with one hand upon their bridles. He was a stalwart fellow, with sunburned neck and hands. Then, for the first time, I noticed, perched aloft upon the trembling throne of hay, the figure of a slim young girl. I could not see her face, but her brown hair escaped in disorder from a white sun-bonnet, and her still browner hands held a well-worn hay rake. She was laughing and talking with the driver, and he, from time to time, cast up at her ardent glances of admiration--glances that won instant smiles and soft blushes in response.

The cart presently turned into the roadway that skirted the edge of the wood where we were sitting. I watched the scene with intense interest and became so much absorbed in it that I quite forgot the manifold, strange steps by which I was permitted to become a spectator.

"Come down and walk with me," cried the young fellow, stopping a moment in front of the horses and opening wide his arms. "Jump! and I'll catch you!"

"Oh, oh," she laughed, and her voice sounded to me as the happiest, merriest laughter I had ever heard from a girl's throat. "Oh, oh! that's all very well. But remember I'm Queen of the Hay, and I must ride!"

"Then I must come and ride beside you," he cried, and began at once to climb up by way of the driver's seat. But, with a peal of silvery laughter, she slipped down easily over the back of the hay to escape him, and ran a little way along the road. I could see her quite clearly, and noticed the charming, natural grace of her movements, and the loving expression in her eyes as she looked over her shoulder to make sure he was following. Evidently, she did not wish to escape for long, certainly not for ever.

In two strides the big, brown swain was after her, leaving the horses to do as they pleased. Another second and his arms would have caught the slender waist and pressed the little body to his heart. But, just at that instant, the old man beside me uttered a peculiar cry. It was low and thrilling, and it went through me like a sharp sword.

HE had called her by her own name--and she had heard.

For a second she halted, glancing back

with frightened eyes. Then, with a brief cry of despair, the girl swerved aside and dived in swiftly among the shadows of the trees.

But the young man saw the sudden movement and cried out to her passionately--

"Not that way, my love! Not that way! It's the Wood of the Dead!"

She threw a laughing glance over her shoulder at him, and the wind caught her hair and drew it out in a brown cloud under the sun. But the next minute she was close beside me, lying on the breast of my companion, and I was certain I heard the words repeatedly uttered with many sighs: "Father, you called, and I have come. And I come willingly, for I am very, very tired."

At any rate, so the words sounded to me, and mingled with them I seemed to catch the answer in that deep, thrilling whisper I already knew: "And you shall sleep, my child, sleep for a long, long time, until it is time for you to begin the journey again."

In that brief second of time I had recognised the face and voice of the inn-keeper's daughter, but the next minute a dreadful wail broke from the lips of the young man, and the sky grew suddenly as dark as night, the wind rose and began to toss the branches about us, and the whole scene was swallowed up in a wave of utter blackness.

Again the chill fingers seemed to seize my hand, and I was guided by the way I had come to the edge of the wood, and crossing the hayfield still slumbering in the starlight, I crept back to the inn and went to bed.

A year later I happened to be in the same part of the country, and the memory of the strange summer vision returned to me with the added softness of distance. I went to the old village and had tea under the same orchard trees at the same inn.

But the little maid of the inn did not show her face, and I took occasion to enquire of her father as to her welfare and her whereabouts.

"Married, no doubt," I laughed, but with a strange feeling that clutched at my heart.

"No, sir," replied the inn-keeper sadly, "not married--though she was just going to be--but dead. She got a sunstroke in the hayfields, just a few days after you were here, if I remember rightly, and she was gone from us in less than a week."

# Featured Artist

## T. Meadows X:@RadLoot



### **Tell us something about yourself.**

I'm a draftsman and and illustrator. I was born and raised in the West Norwegian country side.

I've worked in television animation which brought me abroad both for work and training. At the moment I am the sum of a rural upbringing and a metropolitan profession. As I grow older I my appreciation for the countryside I was raised in grows with me.

(I emphasize West Norway, because East Norway is inhabited by cosmopolitan pansies who are afraid of rain).

### **Do you have a preferred medium, and how so?**

I've had many. The first one I was quite

passionate about was ink and paper. It's been a while since I worked with that technique due to frequent relocation and at times cramped housing. In the recent years I've been working with a drawing tablet and my laptop. A far cry from paper and ink but the traditional foundation still shapes my approach to depicting a subject. I like stark and clearly contrasted fields of light and dark, preferably with a hard edge. Software like photoshop opens up an abundance of possibilities but I am still quite fond of imposing limits on myself. When you throw every disposable tool at the canvas the result tends to become a maimed mess. Kjell Aukrust was a newspaper illustrator who really mastered presenting vibrant and lively drawings even though he was confined to small spaces in black and white.



**Your current works are made for small "canvases" as well, what can you tell us about that?**

I'm making playing cards. I'm fond of old applied art. Cupboards with carved decorations, ceramic plates and bowls. Art and decoration for things you use. Things you act with. I would like to make something you can use to socialize and spend time with others. I decided to make playing cards. My most recent motifs are taken from Norse mythology, the previous deck is loosely based on medieval history and symbols. I firmly believe that people are of particular times and places. We're not universally replaceable. Therefore I'd like to pay homage to pre industrial culture and this is why you will find my cards illustrated with bears, eagles, ravens foxes and so on.

**What type of literature do you read?**

I am very picky. There can be long periods of time when I do not read anything. When I do I tend to reach for old classics. I've been revisiting the Snorre Sturlasons chronicles of the old Norse Kings. It is mythological but written in a "matter of fact" manner. The world of thought is sometimes encountered in dialogue, but more often than not it is left in the cranium. The stories are told through sentences of action. The last time I read something that felt truly addicting was when I read Hugos Les Miserable. For a few days the trilogy left a mental vacuum after I was done reading it. A helpful text for deciphering our current times is Robert Cialdinis "Influence". It is a book on sales psychology that highlights many hidden strings as we stumble through the hangover of the American Dream.







**Aside from art what else do you spend time on?**

I'm doing my best to make an old woodworker show me the ropes around his workshop. He is a friendly and sociable guy but this still feels a bit like approaching a reluctant kung-fu master. I live in the Roman Castles in Italy and spend much time conversing to improve my Italian. I also make an effort to regularly attend judo practice. When working with art and representation it is easy to get absorbed into a state of abstraction. Some proper slams to the floor helps you stay grounded to reality. It is a steady supply of healthy discomfort. Whenever I go back to Norway I always make sure to go swimming or submerging myself in cold water. I have the impression the millennial generation is cursed with comfort and therapy and the cold exposure is one of my rites to keep the demons at bay.



Cover: Crystal Cave

Page 2: Sunset at Nordnes

Page 23: Reinterpretation of Hengist and Horsa by Edward Parrot

Page 24: Fire in a Cave & Forest View

Page 25: Great Old One

Page 26: Fool & Skadi

# The Good King and His Daughter's Plea

A R Duncan



Once upon a time there was a beautiful Kingdom. It was rich and powerful and all of the people loved the King. He was strong and wise and fair. In this land everyone got justice, even the orcs living deep in the darkest valley.

One day the King woke up and went to the top of the tallest tower in the castle and looked out over the Kingdom that his fore-fathers had fought so hard to create.

Around the castle was the great City of the land. It had grown much throughout the reign of the King's father and was now the envy of the world with its exotic markets and wealthy inhabitants. As the King looked down he could see colourful banners running up and down roads, a gay spiderweb criss-crossing the city. The monthly feast was due to begin today and an immense crowd was gathered outside the cathedral waiting for the bishop to address them. Already the crowd had broken out into song, and in some areas dancing and games had begun too. Surrounding the city was the thick tall stone wall that had been built by the King's great-grandfather. This too was covered in banners and flags celebrating the occasion and every tower was topped with the King's colourful personal banner. They all fluttered free and careless in the light breeze. Guards stood motionless atop the wall, much like the King they too stood in peace and watched life carry on in the beautiful Kingdom they helped protect.

A summer zephyr presented the King with the scent from beyond the wall. Freshly cut hay, meadow flowers, and a sweet mead all intertwined into one. Out in the fields around the city, peasants were beginning the bountiful harvest, singing as they worked. All the while great horse drawn wagons moved vast bundles of golden wheat to and from cavernous barns, that like the city were bedecked in colourful flags. In all the villages and farms the King could see peasants were busy setting up long tables and covering them in herculean amounts of hearty food. It was to be a wonderful night.

Throughout the fields and pastures, and into the forest beyond, and out to the coast beyond that, a network of stone roads ran through the land. They had been built by the King's grandfather and served the Kingdom bountifully. Caravans of merchants of all nations crossed the land like a great caterpillar and crowds of pilgrims headed to the City for the festival. Across the net of roads and rivers that sprawled the country, towns had sprung up and flourished, and today these too were ready to

celebrate. The soldiers that regularly patrolled the lands kept order, and with that came peace and prosperity. There were still orcs in the deepest recesses of the forest but they had not caused trouble since the reign of the King's father, and if they did attack, any number of the honourable guards would happily lay down their life for their King.

The King surveyed his land and was happy. His father's City. His grandfather's roads. His great-grandfather's walls. He had yet to make his mark yet but all was good.

"Father?" A voice came from behind, "May I speak with you?"

The King turned and at the top of the staircase was his daughter, the Princess. She was young and beautiful, with blonde hair and blue eyes and pale skin, and she was the object of desire for many a young nobleman in the city and abroad. She was kind and smart and charming and possessed all the womanly gifts that a young princess might possibly need. The King loved her more than anything else in the Kingdom.

"Of course you can my darling".

"It isn't fair is it? They toil all day out there in the field and we sit here in luxury. Everything we have is provided for us by them, yet they never get to touch the fruits of their labour. It simply does not seem right".

The King continued to gaze out of the window for a while, then turned and responded to his daughter.

"Look dearest daughter, they are happy. They are well fed and respected. The life of our peasants is the envy of the world. It may not be fair, but this is just the way it has been. If there was anything I could do to help them I would".

"But father, they are only happy because they do not know what they are lacking. If they had even a taste of what we possess they would realise the fullness of life that is being denied to them. Please father, this is not fair. Put yourself in their place for a week and see how much they suffer. Do something for them".

The King sighed and looked into the eyes of the Princess whom he loved dearly.

"You are my daughter whom I care for more than all else in the world. I will do this because I love you".

"Thank you father".

A great smile broke across her face and she hugged her father.

"Come father, the court is due to begin".

They descended the tower together and entered the King's court. He assumed his position on the throne and his daughter sat on his left with her maidens. The first of the petitioners were envoys from a far distant country presenting their heir apparent as a potential husband for the Princess. The King could not bear to think of marrying off his beloved, so declined their offer. Next was a group of merchants from the City who had several requests about taxes in the Kingdom. The King promised them that he would look into the matter and provide for them as best he could. It was during the third matter of the day, the Prince giving a report on national defence, that the King noticed him.

At the rear of the hall sat a young peasant boy with his parents. His face was pure innocence and his eyes sang with a radiance and truth the King could never have imagined. The boy's expression contained a glimpse of a sadness the King could never have known, but within even that was a dignity many times that of anyone at the court.

The King rose from the chair and stopped his son mid speech. He summoned the peasant boy and the court stopped to watch the nervous child make his way up to the awaiting King.

"In this one poor child," began the King, "I see more greatness and truth than all the men of this court together could muster. Look at him and disagree. How unfair is life that someone such as this lives in the squalor of the fields whilst we nobles live in luxury in the city, living only because of their produce".

A murmur rippled around the court of the King as the Princess watched him with adoration. The King had shown such humility in this act that it caused quite a stir, but surprisingly all the nobles agreed. They did not feel comfortable with the power and wealth they had inherited. The Prince objected, assuring his father that the military matters were of utmost importance, but he was largely ignored.

"For two weeks I shall take his place. I will live as the common man does. Only then will I truly learn from them. Learn of their plight. Learn of the beauty of their ways. There will be justice in this land only when we understand each other's suffering".

A great cheer erupted from the hall and the peasant boy was placed on the throne as the crowd left the castle and descended into the City. The King was certain that this was to be his legacy. His great-grandfather had built the walls.

His grandfather had built the roads. His father had built the city. He would bring love to the common man.

That night, the King left the City and journeyed to the quaint countryside farm he would be spending the next two weeks at. He lay down to sleep on the straw bed and at dawn was woken by the cock crowing. He spent all day labouring in the field and learning from the commonfolk. And by the time night fell and he could return to his bed, his muscles ached but his heart and mind glowed. Over the next week these only grew and he grew a great crowd as they came from many nations to watch the King work the field with a humility that no other leader had ever possessed.

On the eighth day the orcs attacked. Sensing weakness they surged forth from their hidden valleys in the darkest forest and blighted the land. The King was cut dead in the field. After a brutal siege over many years, the Prince's valiant defence of the City saved the majority of its denizens, but the damage had already been done. The foreign merchants fled back to their homelands. The fields of grain and cattle pastures were torched. The Princess was married off for a politically expedient military alliance. The new King began his reign in inauspicious circumstances. The peace and prosperity known to the fore-fathers would not return for many generations.



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# Moxon's Master

Ambrose Bierce

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'Are you serious? -- do you really believe that a machine thinks?

I got no immediate reply; Moxon was apparently intent upon the coals in the grate, touching them deftly here and there with the fire-poker till they signified a sense of his attention by a brighter glow. For several weeks I had been observing in him a growing habit of delay in answering even the most trivial of commonplace questions. His air, however, was that of preoccupation rather than deliberation: one might have said that he had 'something on his mind.' Presently he said: 'What is a "machine"? The word has been variously defined. Here is one definition from a popular dictionary: "Any instrument or organization by which power is applied and made effective, or a desired effect produced." Well, then, is not a man a machine? And you will admit that he thinks -- or thinks he thinks.'

'If you do not wish to answer my question,' said, rather testily, 'why not say so? -- all that you say is mere evasion. You know well enough that when I say "machine" I do not mean a man, but something that man has made and controls.'

'When it does not control him,' he said, rising abruptly and looking out of a window, whence nothing was visible in the blackness of a stormy night. A moment later he turned about and with a smile said: 'I beg your pardon; I had no thought of evasion. I considered the dictionary man's unconscious testimony suggestive and worth something in the discussion. I can give your question a direct answer easily enough: I do believe that a machine thinks about the work that it is doing.'

That was direct enough, certainly. It was not altogether pleasing, for it tended to confirm a sad suspicion that Moxon's devotion to study and work in his machine-shop had not been good for him. I knew, for one thing, that he suffered from insomnia, and that is no light affliction. Had it affected his mind? His reply to my question seemed to me then evidence that it had; perhaps I should think differently about it now. I was younger then, and among the blessings that are not denied to youth is ignorance. Incited by that great stimulant to controversy, I said.

'And what, pray, does it think with -- in the absence of a brain?'

The reply, coming with less than his customary delay, took his favourite form of counter-interrogation: 'With what does a plant think -- in the absence of a brain?'

'Ah, plants also belong to the philosopher class! I should be pleased to know some of their conclusions; you may omit the premises.'

'Perhaps,' he replied, apparently unaffected by my foolish irony, 'you may be able to infer their convictions from their acts. I will spare you the familiar examples of the sensitive mimosa, the several insectivorous flowers and those whose stamens bend down and shake their pollen upon the entering bee in order that he may fertilize their distant mates. But observe this. In an open spot in my garden I planted a climbing vine. When it was barely above the surface I set a stake into the soil a yard away. The vine at once made for it, but as it was about to reach it after several days I removed it a few feet. The vine at once altered its course, making an acute angle, and again made for the stake. This manoeuvre was repeated several times, but finally, as if discouraged, the vine abandoned the pursuit and ignoring further attempts to divert it, travelled to a small tree, farther away, which it climbed.'

'Roots of the eucalyptus will prolong themselves incredibly in search of moisture. A well-known horticulturist relates that one entered an old drain-pipe and followed it until it came to a break, where a section of the pipe had been removed to make way for a stone wall that had been built across its course. The root left the drain and followed the wall until it found an opening where a stone had fallen out. It crept through and following the other side of the wall back to the drain, entered the unexplored part and resumed its journey.'

'And all this?'

'Can you miss the significance of it? It shows the consciousness of plants. It proves that they think.'

'Even if it did -- what then? We were speaking, not of plants, but of machines. They may be composed partly of wood -- wood that has no longer vitality -- or wholly of metal. Is thought an attribute also of the mineral kingdom?'

'How else do you explain the phenomena, for example, of crystallization?'

'I do not explain them.'

'Because you cannot without affirming what you wish to deny, namely, intelligent co-operation, among the constituent elements of the crystals. When soldiers form lines, or hollow squares, you call it reason. When wild geese in flight take the form of a letter V you say instinct. When the homogeneous atoms of a mineral, moving freely in solution, arrange themselves

into shapes mathematically perfect, or particles of frozen moisture into the symmetrical and beautiful forms of snowflakes, you have nothing to say. You have not even invented a name to conceal your heroic unreason.'

Moxon was speaking with unusual animation and earnestness. As he paused I heard in an adjoining room known to me as his 'machine-shop,' which no one but himself was permitted to enter, a singular thumping sound, as of someone pounding upon a table with an open hand. Moxon heard it at the same moment and, visibly agitated, rose and hurriedly passed into the room whence it came. I thought it odd that anyone else should be in there, and my interest in my friend -- with doubtless a touch of unwarrantable curiosity -- led me to listen intently, though, I am happy to say, not at the keyhole. There were confused sounds, as of a struggle or scuffle; the floor shook. I distinctly heard hard breathing and a hoarse whisper which said 'Damn you!' Then all was silent, and presently Moxon reappeared and said, with a rather sorry smile:

'Pardon me for leaving you so abruptly. I have a machine in there that lost its temper and cut up rough.'

Fixing my eyes steadily upon his left cheek, which was traversed by four parallel excoriations showing blood, I said:

'How would it do to trim its nails?' I could have spared myself the jest; he gave it no attention, but seated himself in the chair that he had left and resumed the interrupted monologue as if nothing had occurred:

'Doubtless you do not hold with those (I need not name them to a man of your reading) who have taught that all matter is sentient, that every atom is a living, feeling, conscious being. I do. There is no such thing as dead, inert matter: it is all alive; all instinct with force, actual and potential; all sensitive to the same forces in its environment and susceptible to the contagion of higher and subtler ones residing in such superior organisms as it may be brought into relation with, as those of man when he is fashioning it into an instrument of his will. It absorbs something of his intelligence and purpose -- more of them in proportion to the complexity of the resulting machine and that of its work.

'Do you happen to recall Herbert Spencer's definition of "Life"? I read it thirty years ago. He may have altered it afterward, for anything I know, but in all that time I have been unable to think of a single word that could

profitably be changed or added or removed. It seems to me not only the best definition, but the only possible one.

"Life," he says, "is a definite combination of heterogeneous changes, both simultaneous and successive, in correspondence with external coexistences and sequences."

'That defines the phenomenon,' I said, 'but gives no hint of its cause.'

'That,' he replied, 'is all that any definition can do. As Mill points out, we know nothing of cause except as an antecedent -- nothing of effect except as a consequent. Of certain phenomena, one never occurs without another, which is dissimilar: the first in point of time we call cause, the second, effect. One who had many times seen a rabbit pursued by a dog, and had never seen rabbits and dogs otherwise, would think the rabbit the cause of the dog.

'But I fear,' he added, laughing naturally enough, 'that my rabbit is leading me a long way from the track of my legitimate quarry: I'm indulging in the pleasure of the chase for its own sake. What I want you to observe is that in Herbert Spencer's definition of "life" the activity of a machine is included -- there is nothing in the definition that is not applicable to it. According to this sharpest of observers and deepest of thinkers, if a man during his period of activity is alive, so is a machine when in operation. As an inventor and constructor of machines I know that to be true.'

Moxon was silent for a long time, gazing absently into the fire. It was growing late and I thought it time to be going, but somehow I did not like the notion of leaving him in that isolated house, all alone except for the presence of some person of whose nature my conjectures could go no further than that it was unfriendly, perhaps malign. Leaning toward him and looking earnestly into his eyes while making a motion with my hand through the door of his workshop, I said:

'Moxon, whom have you in there?'

Somewhat to my surprise he laughed lightly and answered without hesitation: 'Nobody; the incident that you have in mind was caused by my folly in leaving a machine in action with nothing to act upon, while I undertook the interminable task of enlightening your understanding. Do you happen to know that Consciousness is the creature of Rhythm?'

'O bother them both!' I replied, rising and laying hold of my overcoat. 'I'm going to wish you good night; and I'll add the hope that the



machine which you inadvertently left in action will have her gloves on the next time you think it needful to stop her.'

Without waiting to observe the effect of my shot I left the house.

Rain was falling, and the darkness was intense. In the sky beyond the crest of a hill toward which I groped my way along precarious plank sidewalks and across miry, unpaved streets I could see the faint glow of the city's lights, but behind me nothing was visible but a single window of Moxon's house. It glowed with what seemed to me a mysterious and fateful meaning. I knew it was an uncurtained aperture in my friend's 'machine-shop,' and I had little doubt that he had resumed the studies interrupted by his duties as my instructor in mechanical consciousness and the fatherhood of Rhythm. Odd, and in some degree humorous, as his convictions seemed to me at that time, I could not wholly divest myself of the feeling that they had some tragic relation to his life and character -- perhaps to his destiny -- although I no longer entertained the notion that they were the vagaries of a disordered mind. Whatever might be thought of his views, his exposition of them was too logical for that. Over and over, his last words came back to me: 'Consciousness is the creature of Rhythm.' Bald and terse as the statement was, I now found it infinitely alluring. At each recurrence it broadened in meaning and deepened in suggestion. Why, here (I thought) is something upon which to found a philosophy. If Consciousness is the product of Rhythm all things are conscious, for all have motion, and all motion is rhythmic. I wondered if Moxon knew the significance and breadth of his thought -- the scope of this momentous generalization; or had he arrived at his philosophic faith by the tortuous and uncertain road of observation? That faith was then new to me, and all Moxon's expounding had failed to make me a convert; but now it seemed as if a great light shone about me, like that which fell upon Saul of Tarsus; and out there in the storm and darkness and solitude I experienced what Lewes calls 'The endless variety and excitement of philosophic thought.' I exulted in a new sense of knowledge, a new pride of reason. My feet seemed hardly to touch the earth; it was as if I were uplifted and borne through the air by invisible wings.

Yielding to an impulse to seek further light from him whom I now recognized as my master and guide, I had unconsciously turned about, and almost before I was aware of having done so

found myself again at Moxon's door. I was drenched with rain, but felt no discomfort. Unable in my excitement to find the doorbell I instinctively tried the knob. It turned and, entering, I mounted the stairs to the room that I had so recently left. All was dark and silent; Moxon, as I had supposed, was in the adjoining room -- the 'machine-shop.' Groping along the wall until found the communicating door I knocked loudly several times, but got no response, which I attributed to the uproar outside, for the wind was blowing a gale and dashing the rain against the thin walls in sheets. The drumming upon the shingle roof spanning the unceiled room was loud and incessant. I had never been invited into the machine-shop-had, indeed, been denied admittance, as had all others, with one exception, a skilled metal worker, of whom no one knew anything except that his name was Haley and his habit silence. But in my spiritual exaltation, discretion and civility were alike forgotten, and I opened the door. What I saw took all philosophical speculation out of me in short order.

Moxon sat facing me at the farther side of a small table upon which a single candle made all the light that was in the room. Opposite him, his back toward me, sat another person. On the table between the two was a chess-board; the men were playing. I knew little of chess, but as only a few pieces were on the board it was obvious that the game was near its close. Moxon was intensely interested -- not so much, it seemed to me, in the game as in his antagonist, upon whom he had fixed so intent a look that, standing though I did directly in the line of his vision, I was altogether unobserved. His face was ghastly white, and his eyes glittered like diamonds. Of his antagonist I had only a back view, but that was sufficient; I should not have cared to see his face.

He was apparently not more than five feet in height, with proportions suggesting those of a gorilla -- a tremendous breadth of shoulders, thick, short neck and broad, squat head, which had a tangled growth of black hair and was topped with a crimson fez. A tunic of the same colour, belted tightly to the waist, reached the seat -- apparently a box -- upon which he sat; his legs and feet were not seen. His left forearm appeared to rest in his lap; he moved his pieces with his right hand, which seemed disproportionately long.

I had shrunk back and now stood a little to one side of the doorway and in shadow. If Moxon had looked farther than the face of his opponent

he could have observed nothing now, except that the door was open. Something forbade me either to enter or to retire, a feeling -- I know not how it came -- that I was in the presence of an imminent tragedy and might serve my friend by remaining. With a scarcely conscious rebellion against the indelicacy of the act I remained.

The play was rapid. Moxon hardly glanced at the board before making his moves, and to my unskilled eye seemed to move the piece most convenient to his hand, his motions in doing so being quick, nervous and lacking in precision. The response of his antagonist, while equally prompt in the inception, was made with a slow, uniform, mechanical and, I thought, somewhat theatrical movement of the arm, that was a sore trial to my patience. There was something unearthly about it all, and I caught myself shuddering. But I was wet and cold. Two or three times after moving a piece the stranger slightly inclined his head, and each time I observed that Moxon shifted his king. All at once the thought came to me that the man was dumb. And then that he was a machine -- an automaton chess-player! Then I remembered that Moxon had once spoken to me of having invented such a piece of mechanism, though I did not understand that it had actually been constructed. Was all his talk about the consciousness and intelligence of machines merely a prelude to eventual exhibition of this device -- only a trick to intensify the effect of its mechanical action upon me in my ignorance of its secret?

A fine end, this, of all my intellectual transports -- my 'endless variety and excitement of philosophic thought!' I was about to retire in disgust when something occurred to hold my curiosity. I observed a shrug of the thing's great shoulders, as if it were irritated: and so natural was this -- so entirely human -- that in my new view of the matter it startled me. Nor was that all, for a moment later it struck the table sharply with its clenched hand. At that gesture Moxon seemed even more startled than I: he pushed his chair a little backward, as in alarm.

Presently Moxon, whose play it was, raised his hand high above the board, pounced upon one of his pieces like a sparrow-hawk and with the exclamation 'check-mate!' rose quickly to his feet and stepped behind his chair. The automaton sat motionless.

The wind had now gone down, but I heard, at lessening intervals and progressively louder, the rumble and roll of thunder. In the pauses between I now became conscious of a low

humming or buzzing which, like the thunder, grew momentarily louder and more distinct. It seemed to come from the body of the automaton, and was unmistakably a whirring of wheels. It gave me the impression of a disordered mechanism which had escaped the repressive and regulating action of some controlling part -- an effect such as might be expected if a pawl should be jostled from the teeth of a ratchetwheel. But before I had time for much conjecture as to its nature my attention was taken by the strange motions of the automaton itself. A slight but continuous convulsion appeared to have possession of it. In body and head it shook like a man with palsy or an ague chill, and the motion augmented every moment until the entire figure was in violent agitation. Suddenly it sprang to its feet and with a movement almost too quick for the eye to follow shot forward across table and chair, with both arms thrust forth to their full length -- the posture and lunge of a diver. Moxon tried to throw himself backward out of reach, but he was too late: I saw the horrible thing's hand close upon his throat, his own clutch its wrists. Then the table was overturned, and candle thrown to the floor and extinguished, and all was black dark. But the noise of the struggle was dreadfully distinct, and most terrible of all were the raucous, squawking sounds made by the strangled man's efforts to breathe. Guided by the infernal hubbub, I sprang to the rescue of my friend, but had hardly taken a stride in the darkness when the whole room blazed with a blinding white light that burned into my brain and heart and memory a vivid picture of the combatants on the floor, Moxon underneath, his throat still in the clutch of those iron hands, his head forced backward, his eyes protruding, his mouth wide open and his tongue thrust out; and -- horrible contrast! -- upon the painted face of his assassin an expression of tranquil and profound thought, as in the solution of a problem in chess! This I observed, then all was blackness and silence.

Three days later I recovered consciousness in a hospital. As the memory of that tragic night slowly evolved in my ailing brain I recognized in my attendant Moxon's confidential workman, Haley. Responding to a look he approached, smiling.

'Tell me about it,' I managed to say, faintly -- 'all about it.'

'Certainly,' he said; 'you were carried unconscious from a burning house -- Moxon's. Nobody knows how you came to be there. You

may have to do a little explaining. The origin of the fire is a bit mysterious, too. My own notion is that the house was struck by lightning.'

'And Moxon?'

'Buried yesterday -- what was left of him.'

Apparently this reticent person could unfold himself on occasion. When imparting shocking intelligence to the sick he was affable enough. After some moments of the keenest mental suffering I ventured to ask another question:

'Who rescued me?'

'Well, if that interests you -- I did.'

'Thank you, Mr. Haley, and may God bless you for it. Did you rescue, also, that charming product of your skill, the automaton chess-player that murdered its inventor?'

The man was silent a long time, looking away from me. Presently he turned and gravely said:

'Do you know that?'

'I do,' I replied; 'I saw it done.'

That was many years ago. If asked to-day I should answer less confidently.

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# Druid

# Without a Home

Chapter 3

Saving the Wyvern

Call of the Shieldmaiden



The pines, which jutted incongruously from the ground in a tiny twisted knot in the midst of the otherwise featureless meadow, barely stirred in the bitter wind that whistled across the Forbidden Plateau. From his vantage point on a dead stump, the young shepherd could see the thatched cottages nestled at the foot of the Abbey. The sheep pasture's yellowing grass gave way further out to the rock piles and bushes that stretched a little distance away towards the towering, distant mountains. Over the summer the sheep pastures had migrated further from the Abbey, and now they were at their furthest, reaching right up to the uncultivated land that separated the meadows from the mountains. The air did not stir down where the sheep chewed their cud, nor did it move the pine needles, but the scraggly hawthorns on the hillside up ahead shuddered in the crisp breeze.

Over the years, Degore had grown skilled at watching sheep graze, and now he scanned the landscape for anything that might catch his interest. Shepherding was quite boring at times; the sheep just chomped away or slept. Pawdraig watched his movements closely. The little dog followed right at his heels and was always up for an adventure. They were supposed to be watching the sheep, lest they should wander off, but just then the fat bundles of fluff were napping, and Clancy was doing likewise. Degore felt sure that Clancy would be able to deal with any problems that arose—after all, the sheep could not wander far before he awoke—leaving Degore free to do his own thing.

A muffled sound came from the rocky outcrops at the base of the mountains in front of them. Degore strained his ears. It sounded somewhat human.

All was silent: he must have misheard. Degore whistled to Pawdraig, who came running over and sniffed his bare feet. There was only the scent of sheep, though, as Degore had been warming his toes in the wool of one particularly puffy ewe. Pawdraig bounded ahead and swivelled his head back to look at Degore, who abandoned the sheep and hurried to catch up.

Degore had soon lost sight of his responsibilities behind a rock pile, and with a burst of energy, he hurried towards the mountains.

"Hello there, young man."

Degore turned. The man who had spoken seemed very young, barely a few years older than himself. Leather bracers covered his arms, which

he kept folded. He was standing before a pile of boulders.

Degore hung back, uncertain, as the stranger took a few steps forwards.

"I am a friend of your father's," the man said with a friendly smile that did not quite reach his eyes. His voice still held some unintended coarseness at times, as if it had only recently changed. "I am just looking for an injured wyvern, have you seen one about?"

"Really? A wyvern! Where is it?" Degore was thrilled, his eyes shone eagerly.

"It got away, but we know it's in the area." The young man whistled and two others appeared.

"Hello, my good man." One approached to shake his hand.

Degore shook it as a matter of formality, but felt puzzled. If there were wyverns to be seen, why was everyone so interested in him and not out hunting them?

"Have you seen one around?" the young man continued.

Degore shook his head. "I have not. And no one at the Abbey has mentioned it either."

"Where is your father?" the young man asked, looking about quickly with keen brown eyes.

"He is back at the Abbey, he wouldn't concern himself with the sheep," Degore said, "but poor wyvern, can I help you find it?"

The man chuckled, "No, it's too dangerous. You run along now." Ignoring Degore's protestations, the three men turned and vanished amongst the rocks. A few minutes went past when nothing stirred.

Degore stood and looked around him, then cautiously approached the vast granite boulders, some of which had fallen into slices. It reminded him of the fruit Freyja had put into his breakfast porridge that morning. Round balls of melon and slices of strawberry.

Pawdraig sniffed the air and growled, the hackles on his back rising, then suddenly turned and ran towards the Abbey as if for his life. Degore looked up and saw some rough-looking men appearing on the large rocks above him. They were older than the men who had spoken to him and had a variety of mean-looking weapons. The party bristled with large axes and spears, and each was equipped with a sword. Quickly he ducked behind the huge rocks and, as more men

appeared, he slunk back further into the darkness. A cave opened up behind him and he thankfully vanished into it.

He peered out as he heard the men jump down to the ground. 'I wonder what they want,' he thought to himself. He looked past the men at the way he had come, but he had strayed too far and the snoozing Clancy was out of sight.

A little sniffing sound caught his attention and he turned. A tiny black wyvern, no bigger than Pawdraig, quivered in the dark recesses of a crack between the rocks as it looked up at him. What Degore had taken for lighter-coloured stones were, he now saw, fragments of white egg-shell scattered about the cave floor.

"You are just hatched!" Degore realised. "I will not hurt you!" he whispered.

The little wyvern looked ready to cry. It held out its trembling claw and pointed towards where the sound of the men's voices was coming from. The wing membrane stretching from the front arm to the body looked thin and transparent.

"I am nothing to do with them, I am from the Abbey and I don't know what they want," Degore whispered, "but you are safe with me."

"They want me!" the little wyvern squeaked. Its little back legs shook, as if they did not quite have the strength to bear its weight yet.

Degore was taken aback. "I won't let them, I will save you." The voices outside came closer and Degore's heart beat faster, as he privately wondered just how he could save a wyvern from so many men. "Move back towards the rock and I'll sit in front of you, so if they come in they won't see you," he said, trying to sound braver than he felt. He was still not sure what the rough-looking men wanted with the wyvern, but he did not like the look of them.

The small wyvern huddled up to the rock and Degore sat in front of it, taking care not to crush the tiny creature. "But where is your mother?" he whispered. "She would make those men run for their lives."

A boot was visible through a crack in the rocks. "They must be around here. Bring the hounds, we want to kill this wyvern before the sun goes down." The voice broke recognisably on the last word, but the youth's polite tones of earlier had turned cold and efficient.

Degore looked down at the baby wyvern, which was huddled up and holding its spread fingers over its dark metallic eyes, which almost

seemed to glow—just a little—in the semidarkness.

They both froze on hearing the sound of scampering paws, followed by the sniffing of dogs. Closer and closer towards the cave the noises came. With alarm, Degore realised that not only might the dogs find him, but that they could also fit through the gap in the rocks that he had come through. He looked around in desperation. The cave was dark and he could barely make out his surroundings. Frantically, he felt around in the darkness, hoping against hope to find something that would suggest some course of action. As he brushed the dirt off his hands and across his shirt front he got an idea. What if the baby wyvern were to fit under his shirt? Perhaps a freshly hatched wyvern would have no scent, like a fawn, and might therefore go unnoticed by the dogs.

A bark sounded, loud and close, as if the dog were by his ear, and Degore jerked into action. The dogs continued to bark and whine and scrape at the rocks as Degore pulled out his shirt and began to put it over the wyvern.

A shout came from outside, then more. The dogs yelped and something crashed against the rocks. It sounded like some kind of scuffle was going on. Then the shouts faded into the distance. Degore and the baby wyvern sat in silence for five minutes, neither daring to speak.

"I will check," hissed Degore at last, able to bear it no longer, and he crept forwards quietly toward the gap in the rock. No-one was outside. The baby wyvern followed him to the gap and poked its head under Degore's arm.

Then a yodel came echoing across the plateau. Degore recognised it immediately: it was Uhtred and this was how most people at the Abbey would get others' attention when the distance made normal methods of communication quite impossible.

Degore turned back to the baby wyvern who turned an innocent pair of eyes up towards him. "He is from the Abbey, he is kind to everyone, he will protect us."

A movement startled Degore, and he was suddenly aware of a presence in the cave. He turned in fear. A large wyvern hand, easily large enough to grab his whole head, came right past him and planted firmly on the rock in front of him. With an effortless push the rock rolled away and the harsh light of day filled the cave.

Degore squinted up at the adult wyvern that had been with him in the cave the whole

time. She was as black as the night, with a soft sheen to her scales, and only as tall as a man. But she was very long, about twenty feet, and her tail was covered in scales and looked strong enough to knock a person about.

Degore stared as if hypnotised. As he got used to the light, he noticed the large eyes that had seemed to have appeared right in front of him. They seemed to radiate calm and control, yet the muscles around her mouth were ready to attack at a moment's notice. He wondered if she would eat him with one big gulp.

Clancy appeared in front of the cave. "Degore!" he called. He stopped short upon seeing the wyvern. "Aaaaaaah!" he yelled and ran off a split second later. "Uhtred! UUUUUHtrEEEEEEEDDDDD!!!! There's a huge black thing in there! It's got Degore!"

But he was back, this time with Pawdraig who rushed forwards, barking. They both stopped and shrank back, seeing Degore sitting right at the feet of the wyvern, her forked tongue testing the air.

Uhtred appeared behind them, and immediately the threatening air of the wyvern was gone. Uhtred picked up Pawdraig and handed him to Clancy with an instruction not to let him go. He was very relaxed and confident.

Degore felt strangely safe with Uhtred there and he turned to the baby wyvern and pointed up at the big one.

"My mother," the baby wyvern said as it came over and hugged him. The little wyvern looked like its mother but was soft and had no scent—unlike the mother who had the aroma of a snake and whose hide looked like plate armour.

The big wyvern motioned them forwards, out of the cave, and Degore carried the baby over to Uhtred. The wyvern only put her head out of the cave and looked around; she even peered up at the sky, as if a man brandishing a spear might drop out of it.

"That's what those nasty men were after," Uhtred said, looking down at the baby, "but they have been chased off, so you are safe now." He turned to the mother wyvern.

"They could wait on the borders," said the wyvern, "till nightfall, and then they will be back! Those dogs will track me down in an instant and I will be dead by sunrise." Her voice was metallic and expressionless.

"Come by the Abbey," said Uhtred, "you will be safe there and can leave under cover of darkness."

She gave a curt nod and emerged from the cave cautiously, her tail dragging out on the ground behind her like a huge horrible snake on a mission to do damage.

The party set off towards the Abbey. Degore carried the little wyvern, and the mother, who never stopped looking around anxiously, fell into step beside Uhtred. Pawdraig strained to lick the little wyvern when Clancy accidentally walked too close.

"It's a good thing you came by, Uhtred," said the wyvern. Degore gave a start and stared at the only father he'd ever known, a man who seemed the most open and honest person ever. He knew the wyvern?!

"I was out looking for this young man here, who was *supposed* to be working," Uhtred said as they emerged from the rocks and shrubbery and started across the now empty sheep fields.

"Children!" the wyvern said, and they both laughed. Uhtred's laughter was warm and booming, and the Wyvern's brassy and harsh.

"His inattention to his duty has done some good in this case," said Uhtred as they passed the sheep. Some of the men were herding them back towards the Abbey.

"What has been going on?" Degore whispered to Clancy.

"Uhtred and those men came by on their way back from cutting wood, we went looking for you, and then we heard shouting, so we went over to see what it was and those rough men were chased off." Clancy restrained the struggling Pawdraig. "The men are dragon hunters."

The little wyvern reached out a mercifully blunt claw and booped Pawdraig on the nose. "What is this animal? Why does he struggle?" His little squeaky voice, now devoid of fear, delighted the boys.

"It is a dog, he wants to lick you," said Clancy.

The little wyvern giggled, his little pink and black forked tongue flailing out into the sunlight.

As they approached the Abbey, Uhtred turned to Clancy: "Run ahead and tie up the dogs. They are not as welcoming of exotic creatures as we would like them to be."

Clancy scampered up to the ancient stone buildings and disappeared from view. The sheep were bleating as they were driven into the fold,

and heads were turning to look at the Abbey's latest visitor. It was not a wholly unusual sight for the inhabitants, but nevertheless they were curious.

Uhtred had things to do before darkness fell, so the wyvern sat in the space between Clancy and Degore's houses, and all the boys from the Abbey gathered around to look at her. She put down her head and appeared to be sleeping, though for all the talk of dares to touch her and promises of silver coins, bits of string, interesting-looking pebbles and slightly furry pocket sweets, no one dared go near. The baby wyvern played fetch with Degore, who suggested the other boys join, but the wyvern was frightened of them. Clancy had tied up Pawdraig nearby and was sitting with him so he would not bark too much.

As the sun was setting, casting golden and orange rays over the far distant mountains, the had been living close by. Degore felt that he should have known about this sooner. He only asked one question of the wyvern.

"What did the rough men want with you?" he inquired when there was a lull in the conversation.

"They wanted the egg," she replied, "to sell to the dragon-worshippers in Mor-Roin Dragaintir."

"But you are not a dragon," Degore pointed out.

"But if they sell an egg, you will not know until it has hatched, will you?" The wyvern looked proudly down at the little sleeping baby curled up at her side. "He would not have lived a good life after hatching. I am grateful to you, young man." The wyvern's voice did not change much from her normal grating tone, but somehow Degore could tell her gratitude was genuine.

When Degore was finally sent off to bed, he left the wyvern chatting with Uhtred. He hoped to be able to stay awake long enough to see the wyvern fly off. But soon after laying his sleepy head on his plump feathered pillow he was fast asleep.

When he awoke the next day he pushed aside his patchwork quilt and rushed to the window. The cold nipped at his toes as he threw it open and scanned around for the wyvern. She was gone though, and the fire looked as if it had been dead for many hours. So off he went to herd sheep that day just like he had every day for the last four million years, it seemed.

men returned. They bowed to the wyvern, and turned to Uhtred. "We tracked them to the western path, but they might creep back over after dark," said Bruce, a hefty ginger priest, who had come to the Abbey after losing an eye in battle many years ago.

"Our friend here will fly away under cover of darkness, then there will be nothing for them to find," Uhtred said. "Once she does, we will let the dogs off, but have some men watch overnight."

Bruce nodded and turned to go.

The baby wyvern was tired so Degore delivered him to his mother, and he snuggled down beside her to nap. Uhtred let Degore stay up late that night, and there were many strange and interesting things that he heard pass between Uhtred and the wyvern. Uhtred had known the wyvern from back when she laid the egg. All these months a wyvern

Clancy spent most of the day trying to ride a sheep around while flapping his arms and talking like the wyvern, and Degore sat contemplatively under the trees. He suspected he had only narrowly avoided a talking to from Uhtred about wandering off, but was burning with desire to explore more. The whole world was out there and he felt he needed to see all of the parts that held dragons, and any other humongous animals. There were many dragons out there that needed protecting, and that young chap, with the brown eyes which seemed curiously reminiscent of someone Degore couldn't quite place, and his band of men in need of prison. Or worse.



unsplash



# The Plymouth Express Affair

Agatha Christie



Alec Simpson, R. N., stepped from the platform at Newton Abbot into a first-class compartment of the Plymouth Express. A porter followed him with a heavy suitcase. He was about to swing it up to the rack, but the young sailor stopped him.

"No—leave it on the seat. I'll put it up later. Here you are."

"Thank you, sir." The porter, generously tipped, withdrew.

Doors banged; a stentorian voice shouted: "Plymouth only. Change for Torquay. Plymouth next stop." Then a whistle blew, and the train drew slowly out of the station.

Lieutenant Simpson had the carriage to himself. The December air was chilly, and he pulled up the window. Then he sniffed vaguely, and frowned. What a smell there was! Reminded him of that time in hospital, and the operation on his leg. Yes, chloroform; that was it!

He let the window down again, changing his seat to one with its back to the engine. He pulled a pipe out of his pocket and lit it. For a little time he sat inactive, looking out into the night and smoking.

At last he roused himself, and opening the suitcase, took out some papers and magazines, then closed the suitcase again and endeavored to shove it under the opposite seat—without success. Some hidden obstacle resisted it. He shoved harder with rising impatience, but it still stuck out halfway into the carriage.

"Why the devil wont it go in?" he muttered, and hauling it out completely, he stooped down and peered under the seat....

A moment later a cry rang out into the night, and the great train came to an unwilling halt in obedience to the imperative jerking of the communication-cord.

"Mon ami," said Poirot. "You have, I know, been deeply interested in this mystery of the Plymouth Express. Read this."

I picked up the note he flicked across the table to me. It was brief and to the point.

*Dear Sir:  
I shall be obliged if you will call upon me at your earliest convenience.*

*Yours faithfully,  
Ebenezer Halliday.*

The connection was not clear to my mind, and I looked inquiringly at Poirot. For answer he took up the newspaper and read aloud:

*"A sensational discovery was made last night. A young naval officer returning to Plymouth found under*

*the seat of his compartment, the body of a woman, stabbed through the heart. The officer at once pulled the communication-cord, and the train was brought to a standstill. The woman who was about thirty years of age, and richly dressed, has not yet been identified.'*

"And later we have this: 'The woman found dead in the Plymouth Express has been identified as the Honorable Mrs. Rupert Carrington.' You see now, my friend? Or if you do not, I will add this. Mrs. Rupert Carrington was, before her marriage, Flossie Halliday, daughter of old man Halliday, the steel king of America."

"And he has sent for you? Splendid!"

"I did him a little service in the past—an affair of bearer bonds. And once, when I was in Paris for a royal visit, I had Mademoiselle Flossie pointed out to me. La jolie petite pensionnaire! She had the jolie dot too! It caused trouble. She nearly made a bad affair."

"How was that?"

"A certain Count de la Rochefour. Un bien mauvais sujet! A bad hat, as you would say. An adventurer pure and simple, who knew how to appeal to a romantic young girl. Luckily her father got wind of it in time. He took her back to America in haste. I heard of her marriage some years later, but I know nothing of her husband."

"H'm," I said. "The Honorable Rupert Carrington is no beauty, by all accounts. He'd pretty well run through his own money on the turf, and I should imagine old man Halliday's dollars came along in the nick of time. I should say that for a good-looking, well-mannered, utterly unscrupulous young scoundrel, it would be hard to find his match!"

"Ah, the poor little lady! Elle n'est pas bien tombée!"

"I fancy he made it pretty obvious at once that it was her money, and not she, that had attracted him. I believe they drifted apart almost at once. I have heard rumors lately that there was to be a definite legal separation."

"Old man Halliday is no fool. He would tie up her money pretty tight."

"I dare say. Anyway, I know as a fact that the Honorable Rupert is said to be extremely hard up."

"Ah-ha! I wonder—"

"You wonder what?"

"My good friend, do not jump down my throat like that. You are interested, I see. Supposing you accompany me to see Mr. Halliday. There is a taxi stand at the corner."

A very few minutes sufficed to whirl us to the superb house in Park Lane rented by the American magnate. We were shown into the

library, and almost immediately we were joined by a large, stout man, with piercing eyes and an aggressive chin.

“M. Poirot?” said Mr. Halliday. “I guess I don’t need to tell you what I want you for. You’ve read the papers, and I’m never one to let the grass grow under my feet. I happened to hear you were in London, and I remembered the good work you did over those bonds. Never forget a name. I’ve got the pick of Scotland Yard, but I’ll have my own man as well. Money no object. All the dollars were made for my little girl—and now she’s gone, I’ll spend my last cent to catch the damned scoundrel that did it! See? So it’s up to you to deliver the goods.”

Poirot bowed.

“I accept, monsieur, all the more willingly that I saw your daughter in Paris several times. And now I will ask you to tell me the circumstances of her journey to Plymouth and any other details that seem to you to bear upon the case.”

“Well, to begin with,” responded Halliday, “she wasn’t going to Plymouth. She was going to join a house-party at Avonmead Court, the Duchess of Swansea’s place. She left London by the twelve-fourteen from Paddington, arriving at Bristol (where she had to change) at two-fifty. The principal Plymouth expresses, of course, run via Westbury, and do not go near Bristol at all. The twelve-fourteen does a nonstop run to Bristol, afterward stopping at Weston, Taunton, Exeter and Newton Abbot. My daughter traveled alone in her carriage, which was reserved as far as Bristol, her maid being in a third-class carriage in the next coach.”

Poirot nodded, and Mr. Halliday went on: “The party at Avonmead Court was to be a very gay one, with several balls, and in consequence my daughter had with her nearly all her jewels—amounting in value perhaps, to about a hundred thousand dollars.”

“Un moment,” interrupted Poirot. “Who had charge of the jewels? Your daughter, or the maid?”

“My daughter always took charge of them herself, carrying them in a small blue morocco case.”

“Continue, monsieur.”

“At Bristol the maid, Jane Mason, collected her mistress’ dressing-bag and wraps, which were with her, and came to the door of Flossie’s compartment. To her intense surprise, my daughter told her that she was not getting out at Bristol, but was going on farther. She directed Mason to get out the luggage and put it in the

cloak-room. She could have tea in the refreshment-room, but she was to wait at the station for her mistress, who would return to Bristol by an up-train in the course of the afternoon. The maid, although very much astonished, did as she was told. She put the luggage in the cloak-room and had some tea. But up-train after up-train came in, and her mistress did not appear. After the arrival of the last train, she left the luggage where it was, and went to a hotel near the station for the night. This morning she read of the tragedy, and returned to town by the first available train.”

“Is there nothing to account for your daughter’s sudden change of plan?”

“Well, there is this: According to Jane Mason, at Bristol, Flossie was no longer alone in her carriage. There was a man in it who stood looking out of the farther window so that she could not see his face.”

“The train was a corridor one, of course?”

“Yes.”

“Which side was the corridor?”

“On the platform side. My daughter was standing in the corridor as she talked to Mason.”

“And there is no doubt in your mind—excuse me!” He got up, and carefully straightened the inkstand which was a little askew. “Je vous demande pardon,” he continued, reseating himself. “It affects my nerves to see anything crooked. Strange, is it not? I was saying, monsieur, that there is no doubt in your mind, as to this probably unexpected meeting being the cause of your daughter’s sudden change of plan?”

“It seems the only reasonable supposition.”

“You have no idea as to who the gentleman in question might be?”

The millionaire hesitated for a moment, and then replied.

“No—I do not know at all.”

“Now—as to the discovery of the body?”

“It was discovered by a young naval officer who at once gave the alarm. There was a doctor on the train. He examined the body. She had been first chloroformed, and then stabbed. He gave it as his opinion that she had been dead about four hours, so it must have been done not long after leaving Bristol. —Probably between there and Weston, possibly between Weston and Taunton.”

“And the jewel-case?”

“The jewel-case, M. Poirot, was missing.”

“One thing more, monsieur. Your daughter’s fortune—to whom does it pass at her death?”

“Flossie made a will soon after her marriage, leaving everything to her husband.” He hesitated for a minute, and then went on: “I may as well tell you, Monsieur Poirot, that I regard my son-in-law as an unprincipled scoundrel, and that, by my advice, my daughter was on the eve of freeing herself from him by legal means—no difficult matter. I settled her money upon her in such a way that he could not touch it during her lifetime, but although they have lived entirely apart for some years, she has frequently acceded to his demands for money, rather than face an open scandal. However, I was determined to put an end to this, and at last Flossie agreed, and my lawyers were instructed to take proceedings.”

“And where is Monsieur Carrington?”

“In town. I believe he was away in the country yesterday, but he returned last night.”

Poirot considered a little while. Then he said: “I think that is all, monsieur.”

“You would like to see the maid, Jane Mason?”

“If you please.”

Halliday rang the bell, and gave a short order to the footman. A few minutes later Jane Mason entered the room, a respectable, hard-featured woman, as emotionless in the face of tragedy as only a good servant can be.

“You will permit me to put a few questions? Your mistress, she was quite as usual before starting yesterday morning? Not excited or flurried?”

“Oh, no sir!”

“But at Bristol she was quite different?”

“Yes sir, regular upset—so nervous she didn’t seem to know what she was saying.”

“What did she say exactly?”

“Well sir, as near as I can remember, she said: ‘Mason, I’ve got to alter my plans. Something has happened—I mean, I’m not getting out here after all. I must go on. Get out the luggage and put it in the cloak-room; then have some tea, and wait for me in the station.’”

“‘Wait for you here, ma’am?’ I asked.

“‘Yes, yes. Don’t leave the station. I shall return by a later train. I don’t know when. It mayn’t be until quite late.’”

“‘Very well, ma’am,’ I says. It wasn’t my place to ask questions, but I thought it very strange.”

“It was unlike your mistress, eh?”

“Very unlike her, sir.”

“What did you think?”

“Well sir, I thought it was to do with the gentleman in the carriage. She didn’t speak to him,

but she turned round once or twice as though to ask him if she was doing right.”

“But you didn’t see the gentleman’s face?”

“No sir; he stood with his back to me all the time.”

“Can you describe him at all?”

“He had on a light fawn overcoat, and a traveling cap. He was tall and slender, like, and the back of his head was dark.”

“You didn’t know him?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think so, sir.”

“It was not your master, Mr. Carrington, by any chance?”

Mason looked rather startled.

“Oh! I don’t think so, sir!”

“But you are not sure?”

“It was about the master’s build, sir—but I never thought of it being him. We so seldom saw him. I couldn’t say it wasn’t him!”

Poirot picked up a pin from the carpet, and frowned at it severely; then he continued: “Would it be possible for the man to have entered the train at Bristol before you reached the carriage?”

Mason considered.

“Yes sir, I think it would. My compartment was very crowded, and it was some minutes before I could get out—and then there was a very large crowd on the platform, and that delayed me too. But he’d only have had a minute or two to speak to the mistress, that way. I took it for granted that he’d come along the corridor.”

“That is more probable, certainly.”

He paused, still frowning.

“You know how the mistress was dressed, sir?”

“The papers give a few details, but I would like you to confirm them.”

“She was wearing a white fox fur toque, sir, with a white spotted veil, and a blue frieze coat and skirt—the shade of blue they call electric.”

“H’m, rather striking.”

“Yes,” remarked Halliday. “Inspector Japp is in hopes that that may help us to fix the spot where the crime took place. Anyone who saw her would remember her.”

“Précisément! —Thank you, mademoiselle.” The maid left the room.

“Well!” Poirot got up briskly. “That is all I can do here—except, monsieur, that I would ask you to tell me everything—but everything!”

“I have done so.”

“You are sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then there is nothing more to be said. I must decline the case.”

“Why?”

“Because you have not been frank with me.”

“I assure you—”

“No, you are keeping something back.”

There was a moment's pause, and then Halliday drew a paper from his pocket and handed it to my friend.

“I guess that's what you're after, Monsieur Poirot—though how you know about it fairly gets my goat!”

Poirot smiled, and unfolded the paper. It was a letter written in thin sloping handwriting. Poirot read it aloud.

“Chère Madame:

“It is with infinite pleasure that I look forward to the felicity of meeting you again. After your so amiable reply to my letter, I can hardly restrain my impatience. I have never forgotten those days in Paris. It is most cruel that you should be leaving London tomorrow. However, before very long, and perhaps sooner than you think, I shall have the joy of beholding once more the lady whose image has ever reigned supreme in my heart.

“Believe, chère madame, all the assurances of my most devoted and unaltered sentiments—

“Armand de la Rochefour.”

Poirot handed the letter back to Halliday with a bow.

“I fancy, monsieur, that you did not know that your daughter intended renewing her acquaintance with the Count de la Rochefour?”

“It came as a thunderbolt to me! I found this letter in my daughter's handbag. As you probably know, Monsieur Poirot, this so-called count is an adventurer of the worst type.”

Poirot nodded.

“But what I want to know is how you knew of the existence of this letter?”

My friend smiled. “Monsieur, I did not. But to track footmarks, and recognize cigarette-ash is not sufficient for a detective. He must also be a good psychologist! I knew that you disliked and mistrusted your son-in-law. He benefits by your daughter's death; the maid's description of the mysterious man bears a sufficient resemblance to him. Yet you are not keen on his track! Why? Surely because your suspicions lie in another direction. Therefore you were keeping something back.”

“You're right, Monsieur Poirot. I was sure of Rupert's guilt until I found this letter. It unsettled me horribly.”

“Yes. The Count says: ‘Before very long, and perhaps sooner than you think.’ Obviously he

would not want to wait until you should get wind of his reappearance. Was it he who traveled down from London by the twelve-fourteen, and came along the corridor to your daughter's compartment? The Count de la Rochefour is also, if I remember rightly, tall and dark!”

The millionaire nodded.

“Well, monsieur, I will wish you good day. Scotland Yard, has, I presume, a list of the jewels?”

“Yes, I believe Inspector Japp is here now if you would like to see him.”

Japp was an old friend of ours, and greeted Poirot with a sort of affectionate contempt.

“And how are you, monsieur? No bad feeling between us, though we have got our different ways of looking at things. How are the ‘little gray cells,’ eh? Going strong?”

Poirot beamed upon him. “They function, my good Japp; assuredly they do!”

“Then that's all right. Think it was the Honorable Rupert, or a crook? We're keeping an eye on all the regular places, of course. We shall know if the shiners are disposed of, and of course whoever did it isn't going to keep them to admire their sparkle. Not likely! I'm trying to find out where Rupert Carrington was yesterday. Seems a bit of a mystery about it. I've got a man watching him.”

“A great precaution, but perhaps a day late,” suggested Poirot gently.

“You always will have your joke, Monsieur Poirot. Well, I'm off to Paddington. Bristol, Weston, Taunton, that's my beat. So long.”

“You will come round and see me this evening, and tell me the result?”

“Sure thing, if I'm back.”

“That good Inspector believes in matter in motion,” murmured Poirot as our friend departed. “He travels; he measures footprints; he collects mud and cigarette-ash! He is extremely busy! He is zealous beyond words! And if I mentioned psychology to him, do you know what he would do, my friend? He would smile! He would say to himself: ‘Poor old Poirot! He ages! He grows senile!’ Japp is the ‘younger generation knocking on the door.’ And ma foi! They are so busy knocking that they do not notice that the door is open!”

“And what are you going to do?”

“As we have carte blanche, I shall expend threepence in ringing up the Ritz—where you may have noticed our Count is staying. After that, as my feet are a little damp, and I have sneezed twice, I shall return to my rooms and make myself a tisano over the spirit lamp!”

I did not see Poirot again until the following morning. I found him placidly finishing his breakfast.

"Well?" I inquired eagerly. "What has happened?"

"Nothing."

"But Japp?"

"I have not seen him."

"The Count?"

"He left the Ritz the day before yesterday."

"The day of the murder?"

"Yes."

"Then that settles it! Rupert Carrington is cleared."

"Because the Count de la Rochefour has left the Ritz? You go too fast, my friend."

"Anyway, he must be followed, arrested! But what could be his motive?"

"One hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewelry is a very good motive for anyone. No, the question to my mind is: why kill her? Why not simply steal the jewels? She would not prosecute."

"Why not?"

"Because she is a woman, mon ami. She once loved this man. Therefore she would suffer her loss in silence. And the Count, who is an extremely good psychologist where women are concerned,—hence his successes,—would know that perfectly well! On the other hand, if Rupert Carrington killed her, why take the jewels, which would incriminate him fatally?"

"As a blind."

"Perhaps you are right, my friend. Ah, here is Japp! I recognize his knock."

The Inspector was beaming good-humoredly.

"Morning, Poirot. Only just got back. I've done some good work! And you?"

"Me, I have arranged my ideas," replied Poirot placidly.

Japp laughed heartily.

"Old chap's getting on in years," he observed beneath his breath to me. "That wont do for us young folk," he said aloud.

"Quel dommage?" Poirot inquired.

"Well, do you want to hear what I've done?"

"You permit me to make a guess? You have found the knife with which the crime was committed by the side of the line between Weston and Taunton, and you have interviewed the paper-boy who spoke to Mrs. Carrington at Weston!"

Japp's jaw fell. "How on earth did you know? Don't tell me it was those almighty 'little gray cells' of yours!"

"I am glad you admit for once that they are all mighty! Tell me, did she give the paper-boy a shilling for himself?"

"No, it was half a crown!" Japp recovered his temper and grinned. "Pretty extravagant, these rich Americans!"

"And in consequence the boy did not forget her?"

"Not he. Half-crowns don't come his way every day. She hailed him and bought two magazines. One had a picture of a girl in blue on the cover. 'That'll match me,' she said. Oh! he remembered her perfectly. Well, that was enough for me. By the doctor's evidence, the crime must have been committed before Taunton. I guessed they'd throw the knife away at once, and I walked down the line looking for it; and sure enough, there it was. I made inquiries at Taunton about our man, but of course it's a big station, and it wasn't likely they'd notice him. He probably got back to London by a later train."

Poirot nodded. "Very likely."

"But I found another bit of news when I got back. They're passing the jewels, all right! That large emerald was pawned last night—by one of the regular lot. Who do you think it was?"

"I don't know—except that he was a short man."

Japp stared. "Well, you're right there. He's short enough. It was Red Narky."

"Who on earth is Red Narky?" I asked.

"A particularly sharp jewel-thief, sir. And not one to stick at murder. Usually works with a woman—Gracie Kidd; but she doesn't seem to be in it this time—unless she's got off to Holland with the rest of the swag."

"You've arrested Narky?"

"Sure thing. But mind you, it's the other man we want—the man who went down with Mrs. Carrington in the train. He was the one who planned the job, right enough. But Narky wont squeal on a pal."

I noticed that Poirot's eyes had become very green.

"I think," he said gently, "that I can find Narky's pal for you, all right."

"One of your little ideas, eh?" Japp eyed Poirot sharply. "Wonderful how you manage to deliver the goods sometimes, at your age and all. Devil's own luck, of course."

"Perhaps, perhaps," murmured my friend. "Hastings, my hat. And the brush. So! My galoshes if it still rains! We must not undo the good work of that tisano. Au revoir, Japp!"

"Good luck to you, Poirot."

Poirot hailed the first taxi we met, and directed the driver to Park Lane.

When we drew up before Halliday's house, he skipped out nimbly, paid the driver and rang the bell. To the footman who opened the door he made a request in a low voice, and we were immediately taken upstairs. We went up to the top of the house, and were shown into a small neat bedroom.

Poirot's eyes roved round the room and fastened themselves on a small black trunk. He knelt in front of it, scrutinized the labels on it, and took a small twist of wire from his pocket.

"Ask Mr. Halliday if he will be so kind as to mount to me here," he said over his shoulder to the footman.

(It is suggested that the reader pause in his perusal of the story at this point, make his own solution of the mystery—and then see how close he comes to that of the author.—The Editors.)

The man departed, and Poirot gently coaxed the lock of the trunk with a practiced hand. In a few minutes the lock gave, and he raised the lid of the trunk. Swiftly he began rummaging among the clothes it contained, flinging them out on the floor.

There was a heavy step on the stairs, and Halliday entered the room.

"What in hell are you doing here?" he demanded, staring.

"I was looking, monsieur, for this." Poirot withdrew from the trunk a coat and skirt of bright blue frieze, and a small toque of white fox fur.

"What are you doing with my trunk?" I turned to see that the maid, Jane Mason, had just entered the room.

"If you will just shut the door, Hastings. Thank you. Yes, and stand with your back against it. Now, Mr. Halliday, let me introduce you to Grace Kidd, otherwise Jane Mason, who will shortly rejoin her accomplice, Red Narky, under the kind escort of Japp."

"It was of the most simple." Poirot waved a deprecating hand, then helped himself to more caviare. It is not every day that one lunches with a millionaire.

"It was the maid's insistence on the clothes that her mistress was wearing that first struck me. Why was she so anxious that our attention should be directed to them? I reflected that we had only the maid's word for the mysterious man in the carriage at Bristol. As far as the doctor's evidence went, Mrs. Carrington might easily have been murdered before reaching Bristol. But if so, then

the maid must be an accomplice. And if she were an accomplice, she would not wish this point to rest on her evidence alone. The clothes Mrs. Carrington was wearing were of a striking nature. A maid usually has a good deal of choice as to what her mistress shall wear. Now if, after Bristol, anyone saw a lady in a bright blue coat and skirt, and a fur toque, he will be quite ready to swear he has seen Mrs. Carrington.

"I began to reconstruct. The maid would provide herself with duplicate clothes. She and her accomplice chloroformed and stabbed Mrs. Carrington between London and Bristol, probably taking advantage of a tunnel. Her body is rolled under the seat; the maid takes her place. At Weston she must make herself noticed. How? In all probability, a newspaper-boy will be selected. She will insure his remembering her by giving him a large tip. She also drew his attention to the color of her dress by a remark about one of the magazines. After leaving Weston, she throws the knife out of the window to mark the place where the crime presumably occurred, and changes her clothes, or buttons a long mackintosh over them. At Taunton she leaves the train and returns to Bristol as soon as possible, where her accomplice has duly left the luggage in the cloak-room. He hands over the ticket and himself returns to London. She waits on the platform, carrying out her rôle, goes to a hotel for the night and returns to town in the morning exactly as she said.

"When Japp returned from his expedition, he confirmed all my deductions. He also told me that a well-known crook was passing the jewels. I knew that whoever it was would be the exact opposite of the man Jane Mason described. When I heard that it was Red Narky, who always worked with Gracie Kidd—well, I knew just where to find her."

"And the Count?"

"The more I thought of it, the more I was convinced that he had nothing to do with it. That gentleman is much too careful of his own skin to risk murder. It would be out of keeping with his character."

"Well, Monsieur Poirot," said Halliday. "I owe you a big debt. And the check I write after lunch won't go near to settling it."

Poirot smiled modestly, and murmured to me: "The good Japp, he shall get the official credit, all right, but though he has got his Gracie Kidd, I think that I, as the Americans say, have got his goat!"



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