

CORN CRAKE

AUG 2024
ISSUE 6



NESTING IN THE OAK OF
ENGLISH LITERATURE



ISOLATION IS DENY. PITY TO BOND.
PLAY TO LIVE!
PLAY CARDS!

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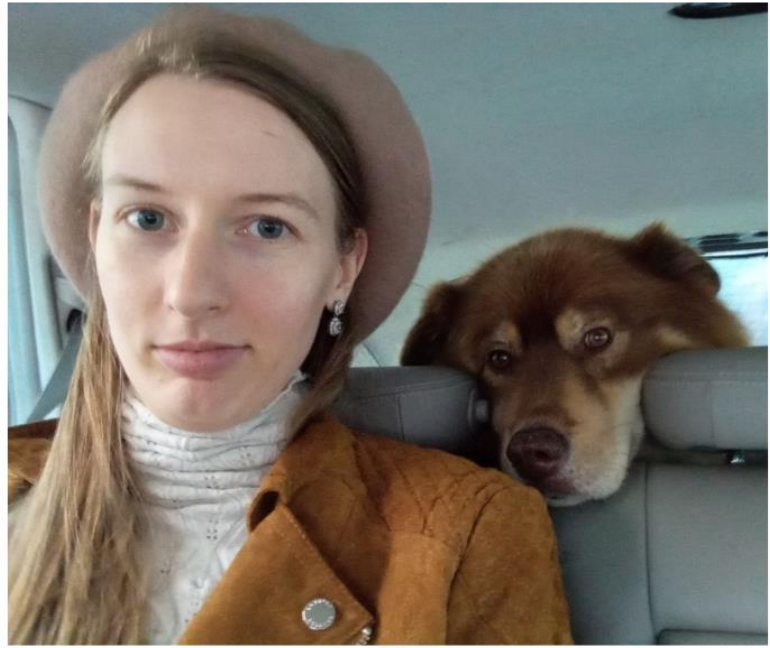
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*A man who writes a book,
thinks himself wiser or wittier
than the rest of mankind; he
supposes that he can instruct or
amuse them, and the publick to
whom he appeals, must, after
all, be the judges of his
pretensions. - Dr Johnson*

Editor's Note



Howay lads and lassies! We are have now reached the 6th issue of the Corncrake and it just gets better and better!

In this issue we feature *The Sacrifice of a Lady*, a story by Nathan CJ Hood, this story has a heartfelt plot and punchy prose. We follow Jones, who goes on an emotional journey which is delicately handled by Mr Hood. Deeper in the magazine, you will find a story from a writer who publishes on a Substack called GIBBERISH. It is a story of a moral dilemma by LR Scott, *Blood or Flood*.

A first time author, American Humorist, joins us with *Defenders of the Faith*, set in a half-fantasy, half-real land that could be our future.

Land of Fools and *Valley Humble* are delightful poems supplied by Splendid Badger.

The centrefold is graced the artwork of Daniel Mitsui. His modern and vital illuminations are keeping tradition alive.

In days of yore, a chap by the name of Joseph Jacobs collected fairy tales, and from his collection we have *The Ass*, *The Table and The Stick*. I have also unearthed an unsettling account of the malevolent inhabitants of an ancient burial mound, in *Pallinghurst Barrow*, by Grant Allen.

My own tale, *Druid Without a Home*, likewise takes a dark turn into the depths of the earth. How unlucky to be buried alive.

Call of the Shieldmaiden
Editor-in-Chief

teamcorncrake@gmail.com



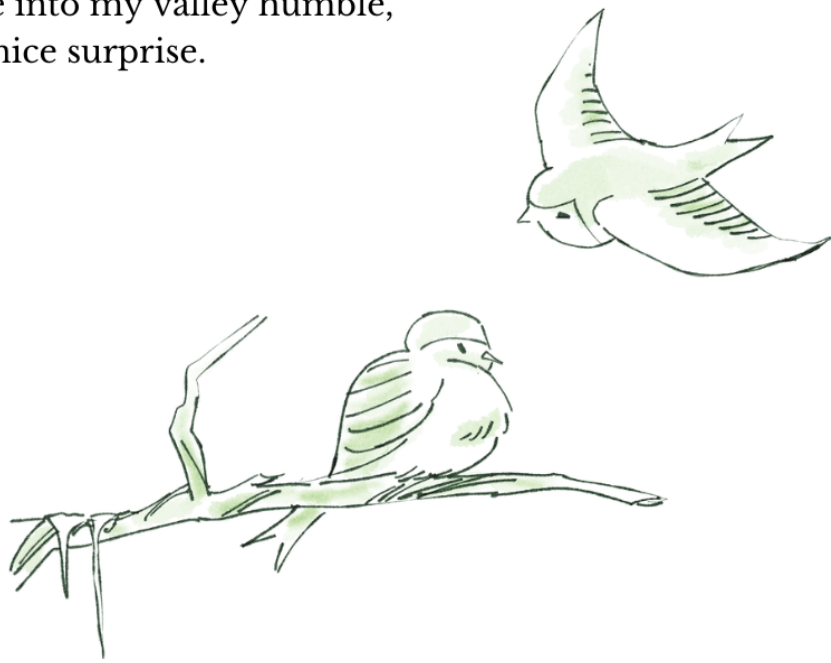
Valley Humble

-Splendid Badger

The purple hue of moorland heather,
Projects its life upon the skies.
Glacial boulders scatter the landscape,
Ancient keepers of mysteries wise.
Quarried cliffs and dales so high,
Faery flowers from the wayside rise,
For when you stumble into my valley humble,
You might just find a nice surprise.

Into woodland softly shaded,
Oak and ash and beech espied.
Fields to bask in, streams to swim in,
Secret glades where tinkers hide.
Charcoal woods with deer that pry,
Nobly strutting, a treat for the eyes,
For when you stumble into my valley humble,
You might just find a nice surprise.

Villages ornament hill and valley,
Warm pubs beckon, "Come inside."
Slippery cobbles to watch out for,
When back you step with homeward strides.
No time to dawdle when the cold has caught you,
Heed the darkness; how time flies!
For when you stumble into my valley humble,
You might just find a nice surprise.



The Sacrifice of a Lady

Nathan CJ Hood



'Get up ye wretched sons of whores!'

Jones bolted up from his restless sleep. As his hammock rocked in wild, circular motions he took a moment to still himself.

'Up ye dogs! Get to the decks! The Reaper's come for his due.'

Filling his lungs with the cold, sharp air that streamed through the open port hole, Jones opened his eyes. Around him hundreds of men were stirring from their slumber. Some hopped lithely from their bunks, while others tumbled and rolled towards the steps that led to the main deck. Still others wrestled with drowsiness, fighting the siren's call to plunge into sleep's dark waters once again.

Jones jumped from his hammock. The thumping feet of the onrushing mob pounded the hard, wooden planks, which creaked and roared with vicious delight. As more and more sailors ran through the darkness of the under deck, it appeared as if they were a mighty torrent swelling both in size and force. Jones was swept along by the hurtling throng of seamen. His legs were pumping, but not of their own volition. He was not in control. He felt as if the will of the crowd, independent from the individual desires and wishes of each man that made it up, was carrying him forwards. The boundaries between the Self and the Other were crossed. Or, rather, the Other was found within the Self.

Jones enjoyed this ecstatic experience, as far as he was aware of it. This was an escape from his own mind. He didn't have to think, he didn't have to act. Something else had control. He could just *be* in the present. Away from his memories. Unmindful of his conscience. Freed from her.

Onwards the seaman hurried through the swaying hammocks, which were violently swaying. Up the stairs they flew. As they reached the top, the hands poured out onto the deck of the ship. Jones, released from the frenzied swarm of sailors, looked about him. There were men running in all directions. A bell was tolling, while officers bellowed commands. The rigging shook and the sails fiercely flapped as gusts of wind lifted the ship to and fro. Giant waves, like great formless beings, tossed the vessel across the surface of the sea. Some rose to towering heights, looming over the one-hundred-and-fifty-three-foot main mast, before crashing down upon the deck below, knocking sailors off their feets. The sky was as black as tar, the only light coming from the trembling yellow glow of the lanterns and starch white bolts of lightning that struck the wild sea below.

'Get to work, ye sluggards!' Jones heard a crack that was accompanied by a stinging pain in his backside. He whirled around in anger to see the Bosun, a thick-set man in a dishevelled, blue jacket wearing a

battered tricorn hat. The stout ruffian was drawing back his whip-hand for another strike.

'On with ye Jones! The Reaper may have come for his due, but he's not takin' your soul to Heavn' or Hell until ye have given me every drop of your blood, sweat and tears. No Jones,' the bosun thundered with a wry smile, steeling himself against the waves crashing down upon the deck, 'you won't be escaping to the lake of fire before I've squeezed what's left of your miserable life from your flesh and bones. Then the Reaper can take you!'

Departing with another lash from the bosun's cat o' nine tails against his aching legs, Jones ran towards the centre of the deck. He joined a posse of men heaving at the mainsail ropes. Grabbing the rough cord, Jones leaned back and pulled. He tugged with all the power he could muster. Every sinew was taut, his body held in perfect tension by the pressure he contended against. Inch by inch the men clawed the rope backwards. The mainsail was rolling up. Buoyed by their success, the men pulled the harder amidst the chaotic maelstrom. Jones felt his palms burn, but his fingers held on with a vice-like grip. Sweat mingled with the splash of the sea.

The men yelled in a mixture of relief and desperation as the sail was secured. But their joy was not to be long lived. As they turned from the rope there was a sudden flash of light. A bolt from the sky struck the base of the main mast. There was an almighty *boom* as Jupiter's weapon rumbled in triumph. Initially blinded, Jones blinked wildly to restore his sight. Before him the great trunk began to totter. Trapped in a vortex, the ship swirled round and round, and the mast tilted more and more vigorously. There was a sudden, loud snap. The mast began to plummet towards the deck. Slowly at first, it gradually picked up speed until the highest point had overturned and was speeding downwards with venom. The sailors had no time to move as the wooden behemoth smashed through the floor of the deck. Jones was thrown, and all was darkness.

When Jones recovered his senses, he could hear the blood curdling screams. Men trapped beneath the mast; men catapulted overboard. He felt a warm trickle along his left leg. He reached towards his limb and touched the moisture, bringing back up a red hand. He turned his gaze downwards and saw a large slither of plank lodged within the left-hand side of his groin. Then the pain, searing and reckless, hit him. It coursed through his body, setting his insides all aflame. He howled and he wept, tears streaming down his ruddy cheeks. His shouts harmonised with the chorus of wails that wisped this way and that in the gusts of wind. But as he yelped his agony was pierced by the Bosun's whip.

‘Get up ye lily-livered dog! Did I not say I wanted every last drop of your blood, sweat and tears before I hand ye over to the dreaded one? Back to work with ye!’

With quivering arms, Jones hauled himself back to his feet. He surveyed the scene. It was carnage. Sailors throwing buckets of water upon the fire that the lightning had started. The smell of singed flesh permeating the air. The floor of the deck was rent in two, the mangled bodies of seamen limply resting where they had been pinned. He turned behind to see the captain, a man of valiant disposition, taking the wheel from a petrified helmsman gibbering away in manic tones. Following the man’s terrified stare, Jones looked portside. And that’s when he saw it. That’s when he saw her.

Hovering above the waves some fifteen feet from the boat, level with the deck, was a spectral woman. Her raven hair was long and dark, her deathly pale skin shrouded by a sea-shell white dress. The woman’s locks whipped violently in the wind, as did the furls on her wedding costume. Her face was pretty, or at least had been. It was now thin and hollowed, as was her body. As he surveyed the awesome and terrible sight, Jones locked eyes with the lady. For several moments they gazed at one another, she into his bright blue, he into her dark red.

As the sailors rushed by and the storm raged around them, Jones and the ghostly lady inhabited a moment set apart from the wind and waves. It felt to him like the interruption of the Eternal in time, an experience of something more real and substantial than the ever-changing character of the sea and the lives who sailed upon it. The repeated prick of the bosun’s whip was small and weak, almost forgotten by the entranced sailor. But as he stared into the lady’s eyes, he felt a rising horror creep up his body. Dread and anguish crawled through his being, until he could do nothing more than scream. Then, exhausted, he sank to his knees and moaned.

‘Jenny’, he whispered, ‘she’s found me’.

Everywhere he went, she followed him. He had left his home, crossed the great lake, survived the perilous forest, navigated the dead man’s swamp, traversed the barren desert. But at every turn, she was there. Waiting for him. Now he was on a ship far from land, voyaging to ports at the nether regions of the world. And still she came. There was no escape from her. Not for him. Wherever he went, she would be there too.

It wasn’t my fault, he thought to himself. *There wasn’t any choice*. The fateful scene came back to him as vivid as the day it happened. Dawn was approaching. A crowd stood on the seashore. Jones was there, a knife in hand. Before him was a boat. Jenny was tied to its

mast by chains around her waist, wrists and ankles. He could still hear her frantic screams ringing in his ears: ‘Percy! Please! Please don’t do this! It’s me! Look at me Percy! Don’t do this! You don’t have to go through with this! Please stop, Percy!’

As Jenny begged for her life, Jones’s hand began to tremble. A bead of sweat ran down his brow. Distress welled up inside him. He turned to his father for reassurance. With a resolute expression, the patriarch of the people nodded. Jones felt a deep sense of loss mingled with relief. His father’s gesture had forced his hand. It encouraged him to commit to a course of action, albeit at great cost. Or, rather, he could resign himself to his father’s will. It was probably some mixture of the two. He was freed from the burden that weighs on one’s soul when a decision must be made of absolute significance.

Jones turned back and stepped towards the boat, which was tethered to a rock. Jenny grew more hysterical, wrestling desperately with her chains. ‘Stop, Percy!’ she shrieked as he set his knife to the rope. Trying to block out her shrill cries and weeping, he gripped the blade harder and focused his attention on the blade, moving it this way and that across the cord. His knuckles tightened until they were white, he clenched his teeth until they were sore. Jenny kept on screaming and screaming. ‘Percy! Percy!’ But Jones kept on cutting.

How could he do this to the woman he loved? How could he do this to his betrothed?

‘I must’, he mumbled, as he sawed the strands holding the boat to the shore. ‘The fate of the people depends upon it. My family name would be disgraced if I disobeyed. It is the only way.’

As the waves lapped the shore, Jones’s tears were lost in the spray as he sawed away at the cord that bound the ship to the rock. Jenny no longer begged; she just wailed. It was an awful sound, a screech filled with fear and despair. With one final motion the rope severed. Jones looked up into Jenny’s eyes. She went silent. The two gazed at each. He saw her eyes were pregnant with desire and longing. His heart thumped. It seemed to him that their emotions filled the whole sky, bursting forth and consuming the whole cosmos. He could have stayed in that moment forever.

Stirred by the ocean ripples around his feet, Jones broke away. Leaning his shoulder against the vessel, he gave it a mighty heave. The boat shot out into the open sea. Jones turned away. He walked back up the beach and was swallowed by the crowd. He heard murmurs among those gathered as the sound of splashing was heard. There were gasps as something disturbed the sea in a violent way. But still Jones did not look back. Nonetheless, he could not shut out the

hiss of the monster, the shrieks of his beloved and the cracking of the vessel. Then all was silent.

A wave splashed down upon the deck, retrieving Jones from his haunted memories. 'It wasn't my fault', he whispered. Jenny kept on staring, remorselessly still amid the wind and waves. Then she began to sing. Her song, which had no words, was filled with desire and longing, sorrow and woe, love fulfilled and love betrayed. It soared over the howl of the hurricane, piercing through the chaos that had engulfed the ship. Though, apart from Jones and the helmsman, the sailors had not seen the ethereal lady, they could hear her voice. Transfixed by her melody, they fell to the ground, calling on their gods and idols to save them from the doom that was upon them. Even the bosun was defeated by her tune.

'It wasn't my fault', he whispered. But could he have done more? Duty to his people demanded the sacrifice. She had to die; it was the only way to placate the monster. It would not spare the folk unless it tasted the flesh of a young virgin bride-to-be. The fates had decided it; her name had been drawn by lot. It was out of his hands; who can contend with both the desire of a demon and those who weave the strands of destiny? How could he have resisted both the gods and the monsters? It was the right thing to do, for the survival of his kin and land.

But was it? Jones felt rising within him the same fear that had chased him across land and sea. Through his mind whirled anxious thoughts that pierced his soul. Were all these just excuses? Were the monster and the fates just excuses to justify his cowardice? If he had been braver, if he had truly loved her, would he have given his all to save his betrothed? Was he just afraid of the disapproval of his father? Did he take the path of safety over the way of glory, the way of life? Or did he shirk the risk that comes with love for the comfortable, the secure, that which he already knew?

While the ship continued to spin, tossed here and there by the torrents of wind and water, and the sailors prayed for their salvation, violet tentacles started to slither up the sides of the vessel. Up the hull they came, until on all sides the ship was covered by the large leathery columns, fitted with large, circular suckers. As their tips began to protrude above the floor of the deck, the seamen lay unmoved, their attention consumed by Jenny's song. Jones alone saw the sea monster's grip tighten on the boat.

'It wasn't my fault!' he roared at Jenny, rising to his feet. 'I had to do it. There was no other way. I didn't have any choice'.

Jenny remained unmoved. Her melodies danced and soared as the creature's tentacles began to tighten.

The ship began to break. Chunks of wood were falling apart. Cracks formed on the deck floor. Water rushed into the lower decks.

'It wasn't my fault!' Jones screamed. 'Please let me go, Jenny. Please don't do this'.

She kept on singing, but now her tune was filled with rage and despair. The creature's limbs moved more violently, smashing the remaining masts and tearing the rigging. Waves engulfed the ship as it was dragged into the wild, hungry ocean.

Jones wheeled in terror. His pleas had gone unanswered, the monster was going to devour him. But worst of all, Jenny would not listen.

In that moment of desolation, the truth hit Jones. He was suffering as Jenny suffered. His fear, his despair, his gut-wrenching pain as Jenny ignored him, they were what she felt as he cut the cord and sent her to her death. A tidal wave of sympathy overwhelmed his anxiety and guilt. The excuses were gone. At very long last, Jones understood, deep in his bones. He had wronged her. He had abandoned Jenny. And he was sorry.

'It was my fault, my love', Jones cried out. Suddenly, Jenny's singing stopped. With what strength he had left, Jones hauled himself to his feet. Through a rush of tears, he shuffled towards the edge of the ship, dragging his wounded leg across the deck. Breathing was becoming an effort. Jenny was hovering a few feet away. The corners of her lips quivered. She spread her arms open.

'I'm coming, my love', Jones wheezed. 'Take me'. Hoisting himself onto the ledge of the ship, he hurled himself from the ship towards his beloved. He sailed into her arms, which wrapped around him like a cocoon. Then, together, they plunged into the deep, dark waters below.

As Jones was sucked down into the black depths of the ocean, peace descended upon the ship. The storm was gone, the tentacles had vanished and the ship was whole again. Rays of sunshine glinted in the calm, still waters. An albatross squawked as the bewildered sailors rose to their feet. The bosun, with a glint in his eye, growled with a crooked smile filled with rotting teeth.

'Ye dogs, ye plagued sons of whores, give thanks to your gods that this day the Reaper did not choose ye. Some other, wretched soul has perished. But lest ye think ye safe, hark: one day your sins will pay ye a visit. Until that hour, I will wring every ounce of your spirit in service of this accursed voyage. Back to work, ye braggards! Back to work, ye snakes!'

Defenders of the Faith

American Humorist



Victory of Joshua over the Amalekites
Nicolas Poussin

“Lord Bertram!”

A yell came from the entrance to the tent. Towering over a table with carefully positioned chess pieces over a crudely detailed map of the area, a dour, bald older man raised his head in irritation. He scowled over at his young squire and nephew.

“Don’t interrupt the war council, Nelson. These are matters of importance, I have no time for trifles.”

Bertram’s subordinates joined in his glare. Six men, each a baron or mayor or bishop, some young and some old, whispered. Just audible enough to be heard, but not enough to be understood. Some fool messing up in front of them was always a treat.

Nelson made an effort to remember his uncle’s address to try and avoid further embarrassment. “But your grace, the reinforcements from Egestrup have arrived!”

“What of it? It matters not, they were expected to arrive tonight anyway.” Lord Bertram rolled his eyes, his subordinates chuckled. “Don’t interrupt again!”

“But they’re led by a Vane!”

The laughter rolled to a stop.

“A Vane? Did I hear you right?” Bertram asked.

“Yes Uncle... I mean yes, your grace. A Vane.”

The boy saw the brief but unmistakable twinkle in his uncle’s eye, a smile forging its way into his wrinkling face. For a moment silence reigned, but soon jubilation overtook the tent.

“Praise be to God, we’re saved!” Bertram roared, head bellowed back, eyes piercing through the tent and night alike up toward the grace of Heaven above. “We’re saved!” he shouted again, joined this time by several of his subjects. His youngest brother, William, left the others to share a jolly hug with Bertram. His hand was outstretched to muss his son’s hair. The boy was beaming with a perhaps misguided pride. The jostling knocked several pieces over at the war table. Mayor Martin, the youngest man at the table, poured fresh wine for the whole tent. As the cheers died down, William asked “Which Vane is it? Paul? Phillip? Hector? Roy?”

Nelson stood proud and tall and cleared his throat to replicate the same confidence and words with which that man himself had announced his name upon entering their camp. With distinguished posture and pomp he declared “The capital has dispatched to us Sir Samuel Vane!”

Excitement gave way to confused murmurs. William asked his brother, “Do you recognize that name?” Bertram shook his head. The name did, truthfully, ring a bell. But the Vane clan was a large one. Prestigious, it was true, and doubtless this man must have some talent to be named a knight, especially to have been granted a command of even a modest group of soldiers. King Edward was known for being very obsessive with command appointments, and Bertram thought there must be some reason for his being here.

Following a short silence William hammered his fist into his hand. “A-ha, I remember now! Yes, a remarkable man indeed!”

Bertram brushed his mustache and went along with that. “Hrmm, is that so? Well, let’s not keep him waiting, then. Nelson, bring him here.”

“Yes sir, your grace!”

“Well, he’s a bit shorter than I thought” William said aloud shortly before his lord brother swatted him across his back like they were roughhousing teens again, sending him stumbling forward.

It wasn’t an untrue statement. Though no dwarf, Samuel was hardly an imposing presence. He was about average height and dark haired like most Vanes were described, though uncharacteristically his facial hair was thin and patchy. He did have a determined look in his eye, however, which gave Bertram some hope.

Samuel laughed off the slight with a chuckle. He stepped forward, catching the falling baron, who thanked him with a sheepish smile as he was helped to his feet. “Southern hospitality is alive and well, I see.” Samuel’s voice was characteristic of Northern blue bloods; it was powerful and clear from lots of yelling. Even very young men like Samuel were taught to be instructors in short order. Southern rumors held that the Northern nobles would even eat wild game and sleep under the stars at night like their rank and file.

“Indeed, Sir knight.” Bertram straightened his posture. He took hospitality seriously, even if his brother didn’t. “I thank you for your swift arrival in our hour of need. I’m afraid our hospitality will have to take the place of pleasantries, as we’ve much to do.” He smirked. “I’m sure you didn’t come down here just for leisure like your ancestors did.”

“Ha! Indeed not, Earl Brooks. Why don’t I start with some bread and salt, then, it’s been a long journey and it’s my first time in this part of the country. How are your rations holding up?”

Forgiving the overly friendly tone, Bertram replied, “Fine, we have enough for a month yet.”

“Well, how about we splurge a bit then? Let’s celebrate my arrival!”

“In these circumstances? Sir, we may yet be surrounded even with your arrival.”

“You are already surrounded, Milord, but nevermind that. Your circumstances have just now improved, have they not?”

“They have, yes,” the Earl mumbled.

“Then let us celebrate, milord!”

Bertram brushed his mustache. He’d kept a strict rationing system, with food spread out systematically to last the full month, correctly assuming they’d be besieged before any reinforcements arrived. Maybe there was logic to the young knight’s suggestion. Morale was

shaky, as he'd been told that very morning. He wanted to start things off on the right foot with Sir Samuel as well.

"Very well," Bertram said after a short pause.

When he saw the elation race across Samuel's face, he wondered if he'd just been had.

At the foot of Castle Brooks, the castle's namesakes twist and merge and finally empty into Swan Lake. In ancient times, these brooks merged to form the beginnings of the mighty Cub River, overlooked by mound, said to be the burial place of a forgotten judge, possibly one of those mentioned in scripture. The site attracted pilgrims from throughout the land, and it was not until many years after the Revelation that the people condemned the site, and it was demolished, the old, sacred dirt dug out to be flooded with what is now today's moat. Whether it be out of respect for history or a fear of the holy man's wrath from Heaven, the great mound was allowed to remain within the moat, forming a small islet connected to the castle through only a drawbridge and a ferry that was promptly scuttled once the siege began.

The Heathens surrounded the castle completely, though their control of the northern shore was rather spotty considering how easily Samuel was able to sneak in with his band of fifty while carrying a small raft. "We figured they were still concentrated in the south shore," he explained, roasting a long sausage over the hearth with a stick he'd brought from outside. The war council, for its part, kindly pretended this was a normal thing for him to do, so long as he didn't burn down the castle. They kept away from him just in case.

"Still, though, fifty men? I understand that it's easier to move quickly and quietly, but surely the palace could spare more than that?" Bertram's letter had called for five-hundred, about a fifth of his garrison.

"Defense of the palace comes first, that's what I was told. They'll send the remainder of your request once they're satisfied they're under no threat," Samuel replied, still focused with intent on his sausage. A few servants chuckled at the sight of the knight hogging the hearth to himself. He'd taken up residence on the stool the moment the cauldron had been taken off to serve the stew.

"This force barely even qualifies as a hoard!" an exasperated Bertram replied with a sudden shout. The servants in his immediate area made themselves scarce. "It's clearly of no threat to Egestrup as my letter made clear! But that's not the case for us!" The Earl was pacing back and forth between his council and the knight's spot at the hearth. His stew and biscuits sat sad and abandoned at his seat. William kept a close eye on his brother's gaze, his meal just barely in his sight.

Samuel turned to face the fretting Earl. "Your grace, I fear Egestrup can only be of limited help in this battle. You and the people both will have to stand with the Good Lord and myself alone for this."

The Earl noted a crooked smile on Samuel's face with that last sentence. "What are you implying?"

"Rally the militia."

"I already ordered all village militia to surrender on contact with the enemy. I cannot have the peasants risk bloody retribution just to be swatted like flies. We both know they stand no chance."

Samuel seemed struck by this, but continued, "Every village I passed through was filled with men eager to protect their homes."

"I'm sure they were, but it's not worth the risk. Surely you heard the fate of the Poor Pilgrims five years back? They think those who take up arms against them are demons in disguise, and they will be treated as such! I will not allow my subjects to become the victims of a massacre just to boost my odds by some insubstantial amount."

Still not turning his head an inch, Samuel replied, "Insubstantial they may be, my Lord, but they will still play a key role in this war." His crooked smile returned. "You did well to spare them the initial onslaught. Now they're a valuable piece on the board."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, your grace, the enemy can't be everywhere at once, right?"

"Certainly not. You mean to have them be a distraction?"

"I mean to have them fight the invaders and demand a response. They can give up as soon as a larger force arrives to deal with them, any suppression they face won't matter after we win. It's not like the enemy has the time or resources to do anything too serious while we're still here."

What a shrewd, clever man, Bertram thought to himself. He stopped apace and stared at the knight. William took the chance and added a portion of his brother's stew to his bowl.

"Sir Knight, your food!" One of the servants arrived from the kitchen with a fresh round of beer and saw a disaster in the making. Samuel turned his head to see a little fire on his sausage. He retracted it after a brief panic and extinguished it with a puff and smiled up at the maiden. "It's best served a little bit burned where I come from. Try it sometime!" He devoured the burned part promptly with a quick swallow. Bertram saw as forced a smile as he'd ever seen.

"I can take care of the details for you, your Grace," Samuel said, returning to the discussion.

"Somehow I doubt that." Bertram touched his hand to his forehead. "Look, Sir, I mean no disrespect, but having just gained an ally in you I find it hard to just throw

him away. You'd have to go out into the Heathen-infested countryside. I'll send someone else."

"I appreciate that, however I pitched this idea to His Majesty before I was dispatched. He provided me with orders that I do this myself to give to you should you require more convincing." Smiling, Samuel reached into his bag and pulled out a scroll marked with the royal seal. He offered it to Bertram as he ate. Bertram accepted while turning back to his own plate, finding his gaze landing on that food thief he called a brother. He sat back down at his plate, reclaiming what remained of what was rightfully his, and read the order.

TO THE HONORABLE LORD BERTRAM OF BROOKSLAND

SEE TO IT THAT THIS KNIGHT I HAVE DISPATCHED IS PLACED IMMEDIATELY ON THE FRONT LINES. I DON'T WANT TO SEE HIM AGAIN.

SIGNED,

KING EDWARD OF KOVAR, DEFENDER OF THE FAITH

Bertram blinked.

"Sir Samuel, did you by chance read this order?"

"Of course not, your grace, it was not mine to read."

"I see."

Bertram sat in silence and ate for a while. He wondered what this man had done to offend the king, though he didn't doubt that he must've done *something*. He seemed so talented to just be thrown away, though. But, then again, maybe he wouldn't be thrown away like His Majesty seemed to think. Maybe this man was right. Maybe he was just the best choice for this job. Maybe that's what His Majesty meant.

He looked up at this unsophisticated knight the King had so generously given him, smiling past the unamused faces of his council. This strange fellow may be just what they need right now.

"These orders are clear, Sir Knight. I hereby order you to tell me the details of your plan and execute them. Tell me, good man, how God, people, and Earldom are to unite and save each other tonight!"

So there are good people among our rulers after all, Samuel thought. The revelation gave him comfort on the short ride north. He tried to avoid thoughts of the royal court and instead focused on the landscape. The forests wherein Castle Brooks resided thinned out upon reaching hills. It wasn't very heavily populated up here, but the more open terrain made evading the already lax Heathen patrols an even easier endeavor, making it the most reasonable start to what Bertram charmingly referred to as "this boundlessly reckless plan of yours." Samuel agreed to take full responsibility for coaxing Bertram into it in the event of a royal investigation, though he couldn't really understand why. It was simple,

sure, but it's still effective. If you told the commoners to stand down to begin with, why can't you just tell them to rise up? Obviously.

Samuel arrived in Bibrax while the morning Sun was but a couple hours old. Aside from the peasants working their fields, the town itself was quite quiet. No merchants sold wares, no townsfolk engaged in conversation, no children playing in the streets. There were no signs of struggle either, however. Maybe the people fled?

After a few minutes' wander, Samuel finally came upon another living person. A Heathen, slouched over in a street corner. He was not looking at the knight as his gaze was focused around the corner, but his body faced him, and Samuel could see a body of (rather fine) liquor, freshly taken from a general store, likely illicitly. From Samuel's limited knowledge of the religious taboos of the invaders, this man was in trouble on at least two counts.

Samuel smiled and whispered a thank you to the Good Lord that he'd been forced to borrow another man-at-arms' armor today following an unfortunate incident with the castle cook's special gravy wherein said gravy ended up all over his holy sigil engraved on his armor. As the maids consoled that poor man, Bertram demanded the armor switch despite Samuel's protests. Samuel realized his employers' wisdom at this moment.

He slipped off his helm and put it in his bag, and approached the hiding Heathen. "My brother!" he cried, "are you possessed by the Adversary?! Speak to me!" The man just about jumped out of his clothes. He dropped the liquor, which did not break on the ground (fortunately). "Y-y-you! Who are you, how dare you?" He hastily unsheathed his scimitar and waved it around beligerently. "Why are you here, get back to the pen!"

"But my brother, I am like you! Though I am not your countryman, Termagant spoke to me these past weeks, he's revealed to me the wrongs of my life and shown me the true path!" He made the Sign of the Star with his left hand, the Heathen sign of praising God, as he suppressed a gag reflex. "So I ask again, my brother, why do you violate the command of God? Why do you partake in the things he asks you not to partake in?"

The sinner of the false god backed down but soon found his courage. "You opportunist! Just because you joined my faith to escape your dying one, you think you can chastise me like this?"

"Yes. Are we not all equal before God? I'm no opportunist, brother, I only wish to help you draw closer to him." He extended his hand forward. "Please, drink no more brother, it hurts us all."

The scraggly Heathen lowered his head, as though in shame. "Just get back to your pen. Mansur will be mad if the count is off."

"Of course brother, take me straight there!"

"Stop calling me that!"

The pens were rather more humane than Samuel expected. Not fit for long-term human habitation, naturally, but the few hours stay that Ibrahim explained he'd be enduring didn't seem particularly distressing. Shame no one passed that knowledge onto the townsfolk though, they seemed a bit scared about being made to gather at the old, abandoned ranch. It couldn't have been helped, though. Very few people had the opportunity to learn the Serpent's Tongue like Samuel did, and the invaders naturally cared not for his own language.

It was almost noon. The liquor-thief Idris held the door to the enclosure open and whistled to his fellows, who were busy heckling. They came over, quizzical looks on their faces.

"Brothers!" he began, "I bring you a convert to join the pen! Please, treat him well!" With a cheeky smile directly at Samuel, he then repeated this in Kovarian. Loudly. Samuel looked down at his once-brother. "Good luck, my brother in faith," the Heathen sneered.

Samuel felt a myriad of dirty looks descend upon him. Idris shoved him inside and closed the gate and then turned to watch the carnage.

There was room to move around, but there was certainly a crowd in there. An old blacksmith spat at Samuel's feet. "Coward."

Cries of "apostate" and "Heathen-lover" and "weakling" and other such daggers to a man's pride soon followed. Samuel endured with a smile. He had to focus on getting away from the guards first to avoid their interference. Toward the middle of this baying, hostile crowd.

Samuel looked, first up at the sky, then down to the ground. He whispered to God, *his* God, that He may hear. "Good Lord above, hallowed be your name. Thank you for delivering me to my people today. Now I'm afraid I must ask that you protect me from them. Please, show me the way. Amen." And with that, he walked forward.

Spit and jeers whizzed like arrows through the air before him, making occasional contact with his face and ego respectively. Arms grabbed at him, their intentions unknown but sinister. He moved forward through it all, one step at a time, following the path God laid down for him. Head held high, he followed, until he came upon a set of upturned crates. He thought to stand on them to get the mob's attention, but the sturdy arm of local lumberjacks hoisted him up by the arms instead.

"Thank you, good fellows! Could I please ask that you open my bag and provide me with my scroll?"

Their snickering at the request gave way to shocked gasps. "This is Lord Bertram's seal," one said, "how did you get this?"

He shouted so all could hear. "My name is Sir Samuel Vane, friends! I am no apostate. Lord Bertram

brought me here to deliver his order to you in these dark days for Kovar. Will you hear it?"

The men lowered Sir Samuel onto their shoulders and broke open the seal, reading the order the Earl had written. The older one shouted over the confused ravings of the mob, "Silence, he speaks the truth! This is a knight of Egestrup, here on his Royal Highness's orders. We are saved! Listen to his words!"

Scroll now in hand, Samuel cleared his throat. It would all be in Bertram's hands after this, but he worried not. If the people did not hesitate in their trust for him, why should he? He read the Earl's words:

"Good people of Kovar, I told you before that you must stand aside and let the invader occupy you. I did not make this decision lightly, but after the wise counsel of an emissary of the king I have come to regret that order. Therefore, I shall issue a new one, one that better addresses the needs of my subjects.

Rise up against the invader. All able bodied men who hear this message must devote themselves either to the cause of freeing their home or of riding out to spread this message so that all under the Heathen's thumb may hear it. Let us throw them out! For your own safety throw them out only of your homes and no further, but with no less zeal do so!

Free yourselves in this village, and then go out and free others who are so oppressed. But when the enemy comes for you, do not quarrel with him, lest he have your heads. Resist wisely, and we will have the victory!"

No further convincing was required. The Heathen garrison of Bibrax, outnumbered ten to one, were put to flight. That done, riders set off in such numbers that they could not be stopped, and thus was set in motion a great rising that bards would sing songs of in all of Kovar.

Bertram sneezed as a shiver ran up his spine. A drop of water had leaked from the ceiling and he'd walked his nose directly into it. He suddenly felt the weight of a fur coat wrap around him. "Don't catch a cold, Dad."

Bertram freed himself from the furs and threw them back at his son. "Knock it off Antony. You're going to give me a heatstroke. Why'd you bring that stupid thing with you anyway, we're going to be on a battlefield soon!"

Antony smiled behind his helmet. "Because what if there's a poor peasant lass on the other side of this tunnel, Dad? Then she'll have to accompany me after the battle. I have to raise her up to my station somehow, at least in terms of dress!"

Hugh, Antony's squire, chirped up from the back. "That's nonsense, Master! You were telling me this morning how you thought the idea of a knight wearing a fur coat over his armor would be absolutely dashing. You want to wear that on the battlefield, don't you!"

"I don't recall you proving me wrong on that one, Hugh!" Antony retorted. "I have thought better of it, though, I wouldn't want Heathen blood on a coat this nice. Unfortunately for the coat, it will have to make do with the lass!"

The tunnel roared with the laughter of soldiers. Verbal jabs came at Antony, and he retaliated to each one in kind. Bertram drank in this time, doing his best to remember each voice, in between checking the structural integrity of the ceiling as they walked.

Under meticulously polished armor, sweat drenched their skin. When a thinning of the enemy lines indicated Samuel's success, Bertram had gathered every man he could spare and together they went to the castle basement. Below a grate under the wine collection lied a hole with a ladder down to a tunnel, a family secret going back a few generations. It wasn't really fit for military use, however. It was built before the moat was, presumably so the Lord of the time had a quick escape in case of a peasant uprising.

Miraculously, it did not flood after the moat was built, though the leak Bertram had just now been literally faced with indicated that it probably wouldn't hold much longer. 'Twas so narrow that only one man could stand in its width comfortably, and with their weapons and armor they were forced into a single file march. It took a full hour just to get everyone down here, and probably about as much time to get back up at the end. What a grueling day. They still had a battle to fight! At least Antony was in good spirits.

The tunnel eventually terminated up another ladder into a single-room log cabin. Initial scouting revealed signs of Heathen activity, but no Heathens in the immediate area. It was late afternoon. Following the mind-numbing hour-long process of getting everyone back on the surface, normal marching order was established and banners were unfurled. They would have to move fast, back toward the castle.

Over the following fifteen minutes, as they approached Ruth's Ridge overlooking the castle, trumpets blared and songs were sung and drums were beat and cheers were raised. Every sort of commotion of confidence was racketed so that all who heard might know that these men were here and they were happy, for it was their victory at hand. As they reached the summit of the ridge and looked down below, there they saw a terrified mass of humanity if they'd ever seen one.

The enemy certainly did not expect an attack from their rear, from the direction of their own homeland. Lined up in defensive positions with only the most rudimentary fortifications, for they knew they could not reach the top before their enemy, was but a small part of the Heathen horde. The rest were variously maintaining the siege or attempting to retake the villages or suchlike.

In the near distance Castle Brooks stood, siege maintained but the other enemy doubtlessly notified by now.

Bertram smiled, for their moment was now. Antony stepped forth, and with a great war cry from father and son, a thunderous charge began. The forces were of approximately equal size in this case, but due to the surprise of their attack and their downward charge full advantage lie with the natives. Ruthlessly, the enemy was battered and bruised, crushed against a portion of the moat behind them. It was not long before the craven among them started fleeing in either direction adjacent to the moat so that their reinforcing countrymen had to see them run. As the sun began to set, the attacked Heathens broke.

"Father!" Antony, drenched in blood as he'd boasted with the fur coat safely tucked away, returned from his wing of the front to the center with a report. "The enemy before us has routed and the enemy to our right has withdrawn. The enemy to our left remains. What are your orders?"

Bertram removed his helmet. He brushed his mustache, sighing. After a moment, he replied with a smile, "Let's see them off as well, what's another hour or two of this? Call for the castle guard to join us, no rest until the whole enemy is in flight!"

Bertram sat on his throne that evening, his first rest long after the Sun had set. It was never a comfortable seat, but even now he took it with great relief. He'd been on horseback or on his feet for twenty hours at this point, and there was still much business to attend to. He turned to the quartermaster.

"Casualty report?"

"One-hundred and eleven dead, five-hundred wounded, your Grace."

None spoke for a while. William was the first to break.

"The enemy fled north, toward the capital. What do we tell the palace, brother?"

"Tell them that we left them a defeated enemy that they now have the glory of finishing off." Technical truth is the best kind of truth for the tired lord. The palace was more than a match for them anyway, Bertram was sure they'd do just that even if they weren't thrilled at the idea of lifting a muscle.

"No objections?" There were none. "Onto the next order of business, then. Sir Samuel, come before me."

Samuel strode before Bertram with all the honor that his accomplishment granted him. Grandiose and posh. He wasn't fooling anyone. As soon as he'd been briefed by the Master of Horse that he was permitted to rest after returning from notifying every village in the Earldom, he'd collapsed in a pile of hay. All heard his snoring.

"Sir knight, you have distinguished yourself in this battle greatly. I will be sure to inform His Majesty and

your family about your noble deeds today. I'd also like to offer you the position of deputy knight captain at my court. Do you accept?"

For once, Samuel had no response.

"I have a feeling you wouldn't be welcome back at the palace, anyway."

"I suppose that makes sense. If you'd have me, it would be my honor."

Bertram nodded. "Come, let us go outside and all celebrate your victory today together!"

So they went outside with steins of ale and were greeted by the people atop the old judge's mound, a

makeshift bridge connecting the castle to the mainland. Aloft they held their glasses, as they cheered as one. "Hurrah for the Good Lord and his mercy! Hurrah for the good Earl and his wisdom! And hurrah for the good knight and the brave men he led to glory!"

And so concludes the story of the good earl and the good knight, who together with the good people of what would become the Brooks March defended their homes, and, indeed, their country through their cunning and bravery. God bless their noble souls, and, indeed, God bless you who read their tale.



Blood or Flood

L R Scott



The Destruction of Atlantis
Nicholas Roerich

For whom the Lord loveth, he chastiseth; and he scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. (Hebrews 12:6)*I.*

“And so you see,” King Barthemus said, pointing at the map over the center of the table, “As our Navigators continue to return, we have a more complete picture of the wider world.”

A curious noble raised his voice, at the far end of the table: “What benefit is there in exploring the world, my lord? Surely we have all we need on our island?”

“Yes, yes, but you see, the Navigators are reporting the presence of cultures on these continents we are discovering. Atlantis appears to be at the center of a great ocean, we have great land masses to our east and west and north and south. Every one of them is populated—we have found signs of cultures on every shore.”

The Generals and Nobles around the table murmured excitedly and pointed at the map.

“I believe that we can set our people up for dominance over these lands and peoples. Atlantis and her people will rise and all the world will bend the knee. We have awoken to find ourselves poised to be masters of this world.”

The King sat down again, and soaked up the excitement from his dignified guests.

“My Lord?” came an unexpected voice from the door behind him.

The King started at the surprise and knocked over his goblet of wine, spilling the crimson spirit over his prized map. The attendants all rushed in to mop up the spill.

“Yes? What is it.” the King said tersely after taking a breath to regain his composure.

“Please forgive me my Lord,” the messenger said, kneeling. “The Oracle has requested your presence.”

“Arise, my loyal messenger. You cannot be faulted for the spill. Thank you for bringing this message. I will attend the Oracle at once.” He stood, and the guests all rose with him, while the messenger hurried out of the hall.

“Please excuse my absence. Enjoy this banquet, eat your fill, and offer thanks in my absence. When the Oracle calls—of course, I must answer. Good night, my friends.”

II.

While the King walked through the halls of his Palace to his chamber, he entered the study where his wife, the Queen Mathilde, was in her books.

“Dear Wife,” Barthemus said, “The Oracle has summoned me.”

Her face was immediately filled with concern. “At this hour?”

“When the Oracle calls I must answer. No King has ever refused the call of the Oracle, and for so trivial a matter as this I shall not be the first.”

“So you know the matter about which you are summoned?”

“No. No, I don’t.” He put on a brave smile for his wife, “But I shall know soon, and report back it’s triviality to you. I wanted to tell you so you don’t wait for me before saying your night prayers.”

“Thank you, my Lord Husband,” she smiled, “Barthemus, fourth of your name, the greatest in my eyes if History has yet to see it.” She gave him a kiss. “I will look forward to hearing your report. Don’t keep the Oracle waiting now!”

Barthemus retired from the study and progressed just a little way down to his chamber, where his attendants had already prepared his austere Oracular dress for the pilgrimage, which he must make on foot. He changed quickly, but as soon as the robes were on and he began walking towards the gates, his mind was allowed to wander.

The last time the Oracle summoned a king was before a war, he thought. He made his way to the Cliffside Path, which was the traditional royal road to the Cliffs of Atreus, where the Oracle of Atreus kept his pavilion. The sun had only recently set, so dark oranges faded into deep purples in the sky, and the stars glittered like gemstones scattered around the crown jewel that was the full moon. Will that same jewel see my imperial ambitions fulfilled? Will the world bend the knee to Atlantis?

The pavilion came into view and King Barthemus’ thoughts were tumultuous as he walked. The clear skies, the calming sea: on a normal night he might have walked this path with Mathilde and enjoyed romantic moments, lost in each others eyes. Tonight I am only lost in thought.

III.

The guards crossed their pikes across the entrance and barred the way for the King—as was customary

“Who approaches the Oracle?” They asked in unison.

“King Barthemus, Fourth of that name, of the line of Kings of Nauthilion, comes at the request of the Oracle to hear his wisdom.”

“What does King Barthemus Nauthilion offer the Oracle?”

“I bring the customary offering of ten gold sovereigns.” He produced a bag of the special coins.

The guards accepted the bag and counted the coins, before setting it in a window where a servant collected it and departed silently.

“Your offering is accepted. You may approach the Oracle,” the guards said and withdrew their pikes, leaving the way open.

Barthemus walked tentatively into the Pavilion. It was an open rotunda, allowing a panoramic view of the sea and the cliffs going off to the west. At the center of the Pavilion sat, cross-legged, the oracle. He wore dark yellow robes, a blue cylindrical cap that was the same color as the night sky, and seemed to have stars in it as well. His eyes glowed a uniform, pupil-less, bright blue. He

seemed to be simultaneously staring directly into the King's eyes, while also looking down, lost in thought—two shadowy faces emerging from the same person.

In his mind, the Oracle spoke—without moving his lips at all: “What do you ask of the Oracle?”

“I come to answer the Oracle's call, to hear what wisdom you may offer the King.”

The Oracle slowly stood—rising in place, without seeming to exert any effort, like he was lifted by a string. One face always locked on Barthemus' eyes, the other face looking solemnly down and away.

Again, the Oracle spoke directly to the King's mind:

“Great adventures here at last,
a world is yours to finally grasp.
Your people poised to step the world,
The globe as your most precious pearl.

And yet, two paths before you lie,
one to death, one to die
both paths down to darkness lead,
The choice depends on who will bleed.

A force to sweep the world with ease
to kill and maim as King may please.
This path leads to Atlantean Fame
Bloodshed in the King's own name.

Or—restrained, the power held
A doom befalls the King as well,
A flood rises which none can flee
A people fallen to the sea.

The choice of path is yours to make
There is no path leads to mistake
Choose the path of fame and Blood,
or Choose the path of death and Flood.”

The King reeled from the prophesy. “When must the choice be made?” he asked, desperate to find a way around it's chilling words.

“No matter what, there comes a Flood.
You may choose the path of Blood.
The one the people here shall fall
The other bleeds the world of all.

Nothing more have I to say.
Heed my warning here today.
Two paths here you may tread,
All shall follow where you've lead.”

The Oracle turned his back and descended once more into a cross-legged sitting position. The second shadowy

face merged back in with the solemn first, and the Oracle went silent.

“Is there no other choice?” The King shouted, “Is there no other way?!”

He was answered by silence.

IV.

When the King returned to his chambers, his wife Mathilde was still awake.

“Barthemus, you wear a troubled face. And look, you are cold!” She picked up a candle and grabbed a blanket and carried both over to her husband. “Take this!” She said, giving him the candle, and she wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, an excuse to put her head against his chest in a warm embrace. “Tell me, what happened?”

Barthemus was quiet a long while, and held his wife the Queen.

“Am I a good man?” he asked, quietly.

Mathilde looked up at him, confused: “Of course you are. You brought the Northern tribes into the Kingdom, you've built roads and bridges, brought fresh water to every village. You have the love and respect of all your people. You are a great King.”

“But am I a good man,” he asked again, insistent.

“You are a wonderful man. You have a kind heart. You raised three strong sons who each could be King and rule as you do and continue your work. You love the people you rule, and they love you back. You are good to me, my dear, strong, faithful husband.” she squeezed him even tighter. “Why are these thoughts on your mind? Tell me.”

He sat on the bed and sighed heavily.

“This prophecy...is filled with ill portends.” he said.

“Most prophecies are.” the Queen replied.

“My ambitions...if I pursue them they will be successful,” he proceeded slowly, trying to remember exactly the words of the Oracle. “And yet, if I succeed, I fear it will bring out the worst in our people. Rather than being wise and good paragons of civilization; we will be warriors, conquerors, we will bathe the world in blood.”

“I see...”

“And yet—if I do not pursue these ambitions, our people will be destroyed. Virtuous we may remain, but virtuous we shall die. Survival means becoming a shadow of ourselves, and in my name we shall bleed the world.”

It was the Queen's turn to take on a concerned, thoughtful silence. The candle flickered as both sat anxiously.

“These are heavy burdens,” she said at length. “No decision needs to be made now. Let us sleep and think more clearly in the morning.”

“Yes, yes...the dawn will find us clearer of mind. The Oracle keeps us up at all hours!”

V.

His wife, the Queen, had decided a course of action for him. The King smirked as he walked the paths into the city, Atlas, and recalled her sudden waking. Go see your closest advisors. Not your council, but your friends—wise men whom you trust. Ask them their opinion, without sharing the prophecy. Go! Go now! The sooner you resolve this matter the sooner you will be at peace.

Even the King heeds his wife

His brain-trust were three: Benethmond, the Judge; Roachiim the General; and Segaar, the Merchant. They have been his friends since he was a young man and his own father had sent him to learn from wise men on some troubling issue. The situation remains much the same.

The King knocked humbly on the door of Benethmond first.

“Who knocks?” asked the muffled voice of a servant from behind the door.

“King Barthemus comes to visit an old friend and ally, Benethmond!” he declared.

The door opened before he had finished speaking, and the servant bowed low. “My Lord! You grace our house with your presence, forgive me! I will summon Justice Benethmond at once!”

“Very well. Thank you, good man. I will await him here!”

The servant hurried off to Benethmond’s study, where a yelp was emitted and Benethmond came shuffling out.

“My Lord the King! Forgive the poor status of my accommodation, unaccustomed as we are to our King attending me and not the other way around. My house and myself are, of course, ever at your service. How may I serve you?”

“Please, no ceremony, old friend. Be seated! I have an important matter to discuss.”

“Yes, yes indeed!” Benethmond took his seat, “What matter is this, dear Barthemus?”

Barthemus took his own seat and reclined in thought. “Imagine, if you will, a man has been brought before you in the court of justice. A good man by all accounts—no prior entanglements with the law, a good worker, a good neighbor to his friends. Yet all at once, his family was struck by hardship. Debts go unpaid, food becomes scarce. At the end of need, the man deigns to steal food from the markets to feed his family. It is this crime for which he has been brought before you. How do you judge him?”

“I see the problem.” Says the Judge. “My heart is filled with compassion for the man, he seeks only to feed his family. I can’t say I would behave any differently in similar hardships! His act was surely noble!”

“But what if another man comes before you—a foul man by all accounts, many prior entanglements with the

law. He doesn’t work, he has no friends. In his hardship, he steals food from the markets to feed his family. It is this crime for which he has been brought before you. How do you judge this second man?”

“Ahh, this man is a thief. He is a menace, a drain on society. I have no compassion for this man.”

“Yet the substance of the act is the same—both men stole food to feed their families. By the law, are not both men guilty of the same crime?”

“Ahhh...” The judge was silent. “I see your point. And yet, in the first case the circumstances are unavoidable, in the second the circumstances surely are not?”

“I never elaborated on the circumstances of the second man—perhaps if I were to, we might find him as much deserving of compassion as the first. Both men deigned to steal, only one man behaved opposite to his character, while the other behaved in accordance with his character.”

“In the courts we are to judge by the act and not by the virtue of the men—no man can see into the soul of another.”

“Suppose then there is a third man, whose circumstances are identical to the first. Yet he refuses to dishonor himself by stealing. He and his family go hungry and starve to death, and die in the streets. Was this man virtuous to die and refuse to steal?

“Surely there are other ways he could have found to provide for his family than stealing! The choice you are putting to me is to choose between stealing or death! By all means—steal! Face justice for stealing, but death feels like a grievous act of neglect.”

“Well said, Benethmond. The key, I gather from what you’ve said, is to ‘face justice for stealing’. What is the penalty for theft, good Judge?”

“It depends of course on the value stolen and other circumstances, but it would be a fine of restitution, or jail time. He would be separated from his family for a time, but they would be alive.”

“I see. And if the value of the stolen good were infinite?”

“There is no such infinite good that can be stolen!

“Humor me, good judge!”

“Well...I daresay, an infinite crime would need an infinite punishment. He would be sentenced to jail for eternity!”

“Is that not a kind of death?”

“Perhaps, yet—for a living family?”

“A finite good?”

“It seems a poor trade, I agree.”

“Very poor indeed,” said the King.

VII.

King Barthemus next sought out the General Roachiim. The General was at his banquet yesterday, which was interrupted by the Oracle. There would be no hiding that the Oracle’s prophesy was on his mind.

He found the General at Military Academy, where he was reviewing dispatches from his lieutenants. When he entered the room, the General shot to his feet and saluted. "My Lord!" he said, standing at attention.

"General Roachiim, at ease, my friend. I come for your wisdom and friendship. No ceremony, please."

The general relaxed, but remained standing. "You do me a great honor my Lord. Please, come, sit, as ever I am wholly at your service, my mind, body, and spirit. Discharge your mind and I will offer such wisdom as I can muster!"

The King sat behind the General's desk and the General followed. "Thank you, friend. I can always rely on you for unvarnished truths. I cannot deceive you—the Oracle's offering weighs on my mind."

"That so? Out with it, my Lord, what has that madman burdened you with?"

"Hardly a mad man, Roachiim. The Oracles have always served our people."

"Served to confuse them, if you'll pardon my saying so! What was it this time?"

"Let me put it to you obliquely."

"I expect nothing less," Roachiim quipped.

"You are a general, you understand having souls under your care. The choice is between fighting the wrong way and winning, or fighting the right way and being utterly defeated."

"Well let me stop you there, My Lord, begging your pardon. There's no wrong way to fight a war! Kill the bastards and you win!"

"If you burn down a city, for example, you're no better than rioters. We hold ourselves to a higher standard, do we not? I remember those Northern tribes would disguise themselves as civilians and then ambush our soldiers while they were on leave. They really confounded our strategists for a while."

"I am quite embarrassed to recall, my Lord."

"So imagine if I authorized you to kill civilians of the Northern tribes. We would have won quickly, but at what cost? They would never have agreed to submit to my rule, if any of them remained alive at all. Yet if we continued fighting with our normal doctrine, they would have utterly destroyed us."

"But you see this is a false choice, because we adapted our doctrine and then they sued for peace."

"We don't always have the choice to adapt, you know well."

"Well what are the circumstances! Let's see."

"I couldn't share—but in short it's the choice between our values as Atlantis, or untold destruction."

"Permission to speak freely, my Lord?"

"I've already given you permission, Roachiim. I need your unvarnished thoughts."

"You're our King, Lord. You're charged with our care. Untold destruction doesn't sound like a good way to care for us."

"I'm also charged with caring for our souls, as well as our material needs."

"What good is virtue if we are dead? Away with all that. I never bought into the superstitions of the Oracle. Away with all that. Better to be alive and vicious, than dead and virtuous."

VII.

The King finally looked for Segaar, the Merchant. He has a shop by the fishport where he trades wares from seafarers and supplies for fishermen. Segaar and King Barthemus played together as children, before their lives took them on different paths. Yet they always remained friends, and often sought each others company and wisdom.

The King entered Segaar's shop and he was busy working amid some shelves. "Welcome to my Shop! Just a moment!"

"You would make the King wait on you?" Barthemus quipped.

Segaar turned around, shocked. "My Lord! What an honor! Come in, come in, surely you are not here to shop? Shall we retire?"

"Let's do, friend. I have a grave matter on my mind and I would like to get your wisdom."

"Yes, of course. Meecher! Mind the shop, please!" Segaar shouted, while leading the King to an office in the back, with a table where they could speak.

"So, my Lord, there's rumors you've been called to see the Oracle? Is it true?"

"Word travels fast!"

"People talk too much, Lord, you know this."

"Yes, yes. The rumors are true, nevertheless. I have been to see the Oracle. I cannot say more. I have this matter I would like to discuss with you."

"Begging your pardon, Lord. What matter weighs your royal shoulders?"

"Allow me to put it to you this way. You find on a far-away island there are rare resources which can be found. In order to get these resources, you must do grossly immoral acts. You know there is money to be made, and it could mean your shop can prosper and continue. If you keep your virtue and refuse to exploit these resources, you may not be able to continue—but your conscience is clear. What do you do?"

Segaar didn't hesitate. "I get the mysterious resource. Do you think I have achieved the success that I have by maintaining rigid virtue? Business is business—and whatever the immorality is, the profit benefits me and on the whole it benefits our people. I can do more for Atlantis with more profit and more resources. There's no doubt in my mind about which course of action to take. What was the challenge? Why was this weighing on you?"

“Virtue, Segaar! Our virtue as people, collectively and individually. Atlantis is the paragon of civilization. At the heart of our success is our values as much as our material prosperity. My job as King is to ensure we attain prosperity in accordance with our values. Is it worth it to have one without the other?”

“Let me put a counterpoint to you, Lord King. Is it better to have prosperity without values, or values without prosperity? Would you allow Atlantis to be universally poor and hungry, but virtuous; or would you prefer Atlantis to be prosperous yet have to deal with a rise in vice?”

“It’s a question of our soul as a people, and as individuals. And our soul is our most precious gift. What good is it to fill our temples with gold if we all go to hell? How much better for us to go to heaven, despite our suffering here on earth?”

“Well I don’t know what to say, my Lord, I don’t know what quandary is on your mind but it sounds like you know what you want.”

VIII.

It had been a long day, and King Barthemus had traveled around the city seeking answers to these questions which darkened his mind.

He found his wife, the Queen Mathilde, in her books again—her favorite hideout. She looked up with a start when he pushed open the door. “Lord Husband! You’re back! You look tired.”

“I feel as if I have walked all over creation. It is good to get out and among the people, though. I do love them. And I love my friends—it is good to hear their points of view.”

“Do you feel relief?”

He gave his wife a look that told her more than he could say. “No relief, but perhaps resolve.”

“That is good too. So you’ve come to a decision?”

“Yes. It will not make me popular but I do believe it is the right decision.”

“I know it is.”

“I haven’t told you my decision! How could you know?”

She went over to her husband and wrapped him once again in her arms. “I know you. I knew the decision you would make this morning. I also know you need to talk to your advisors to help give you that resolve.”

“Heavy is the head that wears the crown.” he said with a sigh, and he kissed the Queen on her forehead.

IX.

“And so you see,” King Barthemus said, pointing at the map over the center of the table, “When the last Navigators return we will announce a feast of Thanksgiving, five days of penance followed by ten days of thanks.”

An angry noble raised his voice, at the far end of the table. “You would recall our navigators? What about the

conquest of the world, which we discussed when we last met?”

“I have decided not to pursue it.” Barthemus replied. “We will leave the outside world alone, so as to avoid the temptation. We will redouble our effort on the things that make our people good and great. This feast of thanksgiving, we will give thanks to God for all that He has given us and the richness and prosperity of this island of ours.”

The nobles were outraged. Some shouted, some stood, all pointed at the map, some bolder ones pointed at the King.

The King calmly remained standing, with a serene countenance, and extended his hands palm down as if to tell his council to calm down.

“This decision is made and it is final. It is not open to discussion. I value your opinions and you are welcome to express yourselves—I want to hear all that you have to say. But I will not be moved.” The King sat calmly. “Who would like to speak first?”

X.

King Barthemus IV recalled the decision, all those years ago, and how his wife had helped him make it. Now, he sat in the grass, next to her memorial. It has been some years since she died peacefully—though the sting of her passing is not eased by time.

The prophecy of the Oracle came unbidden to mind. The path the King led his people on was a difficult choice of self restraint, but his wife embraced it. Her passing meant that she would be spared suffering the fate of the people—a small mercy, Thanks be to God, the King thought.

The memorial overlooked the sea, and the cliffs of Atreus stretched out to the south and west. The Oracle’s pavilion was silhouetted against the blue sky. Just then, the earth began to shake—small rumblings at first, then violently, and knocked the old King Barthemus to the ground. He watched rocks tumble off the cliffs, and held on to clumps of grass as if the shaking earth was going to fling him into the sky. He heard sounds of chaos from the city in the distance, behind him. The earth shook for what felt like half an hour.

When the shaking finally stopped, the King peered out to the sea, and saw massive waves rushing towards the island.

The cliffs started to crumble, and the King saw the Oracle’s pavilion crumble off the edge and fall into the sea. A pervasive rumbling, began emerging from the ground and made the King feel the ground was unstable.

The King sat on the ground next to his wife, and held on to a clump of grass. “I’ll see you soon, my Mathilde.” he said. He watched as the waves approached, grew, and seemed to swallow up the whole horizon.

“And now, the Flood.”

Featured Artist:

Daniel Mitsui



Tell us a little bit about yourself.

I am 42 years old and married, and the father of two boys and two girls. I live with my family in northwest Indiana, not far from Chicago. I have always been artistically inclined, and have at times studied oil painting, etching, lithography, cartooning, film animation, calligraphy, charcoal drawing, collage, jewelry making, and wood carving. But ink drawing is what I like most and do best, and that is my specialty. I make drawings that are very minutely detailed, and mostly inspired by medieval Gothic art.

Artwork has been my livelihood since 2010; I mostly make religious drawings on commission. I also make calligraphy, typefaces, surface patterns, bookplates, and drawings in Celtic, Japanese, Chinese, and Persian styles.

Other than your faith, what motivates your drawing of religious motifs?

I have always been drawn to things that are old, traditional, and somewhat mysterious. That may be an inherent personality trait. As a Catholic, I find satisfaction in the liturgical and iconographic and devotional traditions of my Church — what is left of them, anyway — and in looking to religious history to find parts of them to revive.

I think that if I were not religious, I would still find medieval Christianity endlessly fascinating. The understanding of time, space, and symbol that is expressed in its art is very different from that of the modern world — and more true, I believe.

There are other subjects that I would probably enjoy illustrating — Arthurian legends, for example, or Persian poetry. But they all share the traits of tradition, mystery, and a premodern understanding.

Aside from your art, do you have any other passions?

I like to write poetry, and I take that pretty seriously. I just published my first collection, which is titled *The Wretch on the Gallows Tree*. Recently, I have been watching a lot of animated films, both features and shorts. I studied animation a little when I was in college, and gave some thought to pursuing it professionally. Some day, I would like to revisit it, and make an animated short film myself. I enjoy board games and card games.

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What attracted you to the illumination style?

As a very young child, I remember that some of my favorite artwork was made to resemble illuminated manuscripts, although I did not know that at the time - specifically, I am thinking of Trina Schart Hyman's illustrations to *St. George and the Dragon* and Eyvind Earle's painted backgrounds to *Sleeping Beauty*. I first remember seeing pictures of actual illuminated manuscripts in a calligraphy instruction book, when I was 13 or 14. I was very deeply impressed by them, particularly the Chi-Rho page from the Lindisfarne Gospels.

Manuscript illumination is an artistic medium that combines three things that particularly interest me: religious iconography, letterforms, and intricate ornament. It also combines visual art with literature; media that do that tend to interest me: comics, picture books, incunabula, or illuminated manuscripts.

Although I have made many drawings and calligraphic works in the manuscript style, I have not yet illuminated a complete book. I would like to do so some day, although I know that it would be an expensive project to commission.

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

I tend to read a lot of books concurrently, some on my own and some out loud to my kids. I mostly read medieval literature, children's literature, poetry, and comics.

I have been reading *The Divine Comedy* for the third time, and currently am about halfway through Purgatory. This time it is the Dorothy Sayers translation. My wife and I have been reading some Shakespeare together; right now we are on *The Merchant of Venice*. I have a bookmark in Hayao Miyazaki's manga *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and in John Myers O'Hara's translation of Sappho's poetry. For reading aloud, I have just started *Monkey*, which is Arthur Waley's abridged translation of Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West*; and also *Come Hither*, a poetry anthology compiled by Walter de la Mare. Also, the Bible; I am reading *The Acts of the Apostles* now.



The Leaves that Fall

-Splendid Badger

Memories rain like leaves falling from a rustled branch,
And as they commence their final flutter towards the earth,
They dance to the fine tune of the wind.
The orchestra plays, and the trees listen.
As the shades of green glisten in the evening sun,
While the long grasses lean upon each other,
The pace at which the sun goes down seems to remain as fixed as fate,
And memories fade to nourish us as we absorb the impacts of nature's wrath.
The greens turning from orange to yellow,
Living, dying credence that nothing lasts.
But yet to grasp, is such a human thing,
To clutch and scrape at the past, is such a frivolous thing.
Just let go of the leaves, to let your heart breathe, my friend,
And allow the memories to nourish your heart once again.





Love Will Find Out the Way

Over the mountains
And over the waves,
Under the fountains
And under the graves;
Under floods that are deepest,
Which Neptune obey,
Over rocks that are steepest,
Love will find out the way.

When there is no place
For the glow-worm to lie,
When there is no space
For receipt of a fly;
When the midge dares not venture
Lest herself fast she lay,
If Love come, he will enter
And will find out the way.

You may esteem him
A child for his might;
Or you may deem him
A coward for his flight;
But if she whom Love doth honour
Be conceal'd from the day—
Set a thousand guards upon her,
Love will find out the way.

Some think to lose him
By having him confined;
And some do suppose him,
Poor heart! to be blind;

But if ne'er so close ye wall him,
Do the best that ye may,
Blind Love, if so ye call him,
He will find out his way.

You may train the eagle
To stoop to your fist;
Or you may inveigle
The Phoenix of the east;
The lioness, you may move her
To give over her prey;
But you'll ne'er stop a lover—
He will find out the way.

If the earth it should part him,
He would gallop it o'er;
If the seas should o'erthwart him,
He would swim to the shore;
Should his Love become a swallow,
Through the air to stray,
Love will lend wings to follow,
And will find out the way.

There is no striving
To cross his intent;
There is no contriving
His plots to prevent;
But if once the message greet him
That his True Love doth stay,
If Death should come and meet him,
Love will find out the way!

-anonymous

The Ass, the Table, and the Stick

English Fairy tales collected by Joseph Jacobs



A lad named Jack was once so unhappy at home through his father's ill-treatment, that he made up his mind to run away and seek his fortune in the wide world.

He ran, and he ran, till he could run no longer, and then he ran right up against a little old woman who was gathering sticks. He was too much out of breath to beg pardon, but the woman was good-natured, and she said he seemed to be a likely lad, so she would take him to be her servant, and would pay him well. He agreed, for he was very hungry, and she brought him to her house in the wood, where he served her for a twelvemonths and a day.

When the year had passed, she called him to her, and said she had good wages for him. So she presented him with an ass out of the stable, and he had but to pull Neddy's ears to make him begin at once to ee—aw! And when he brayed there dropped from his mouth silver sixpences, and half crowns, and golden guineas.

The lad was well pleased with the wage he had received, and away he rode till he reached an inn. There he ordered the best of everything, and when the innkeeper refused to serve him without being paid beforehand, the boy went off to the stable, pulled the ass's ears and obtained his pocket full of money. The host had watched all this through a crack in the door, and when night came on he put an ass of his own for the precious Neddy of the poor youth. So Jack without knowing that any change had been made, rode away next morning to his father's house.

Now, I must tell you that near his home dwelt a poor widow with an only daughter. The lad and the maiden were fast friends and true loves; but when Jack asked his father's leave to marry the girl, "Never till you have the money to keep her," was the reply. "I have that, father," said the lad, and going to the ass he pulled its long ears; well, he pulled, and he pulled, till one of them came off in his hands; but Neddy, though he hee-hawed and he hee-hawed let fall no half crowns or guineas. The father picked up a hay-fork and beat his son out of the house. I promise you he ran. Ah! he ran and ran till he came bang against the door, and burst it open, and there he was in a joiner's shop. "You're a likely lad," said the joiner; "serve me for a twelvemonths and a day and I will pay you well." So he agreed, and served the carpenter for a year and a day. "Now," said the master, "I will give you your wage;" and he presented him with a table, telling him he had but to say, "Table, be covered," and at once it would be spread with lots to eat and drink.

Jack hitched the table on his back, and away he went with it till he came to the inn. "Well, host," shouted he, "my dinner to-day, and that of the best."

"Very sorry, but there is nothing in the house but ham and eggs."

"Ham and eggs for me!" exclaimed Jack. "I can do better than that.—Come, my table, be covered!"

At once the table was spread with turkey and sausages, roast mutton, potatoes, and greens. The publican opened his eyes, but he said nothing, not he.

That night he fetched down from his attic a table very like that of Jack, and exchanged the two. Jack, none the wiser, next morning hitched the worthless table on to his back and carried it home. "Now, father, may I marry my lass?" he asked.

"Not unless you can keep her," replied the father. "Look here!" exclaimed Jack. "Father, I have a table which does all my bidding."

"Let me see it," said the old man.

The lad set it in the middle of the room, and bade it be covered; but all in vain, the table remained bare. In a rage, the father caught the warming-pan down from the wall and warmed his son's back with it so that the boy fled howling from the house, and ran and ran till he came to a river and tumbled in. A man picked him out and bade him assist him in making a bridge over the river; and how do you think he was doing it? Why, by casting a tree across; so Jack climbed up to the top of the tree and threw his weight on it, so that when the man had rooted the tree up, Jack and the tree-head dropped on the farther bank.

"Thank you," said the man; "and now for what you have done I will pay you;" so saying, he tore a branch from the tree, and fettle it up into a club with his knife. "There," exclaimed he; "take this stick, and when you say to it, 'Up stick and bang him,' it will knock any one down who angers you."

The lad was overjoyed to get this stick—so away he went with it to the inn, and as soon as the publican, appeared, "Up stick and bang him!" was his cry. At the word the cudgel flew from his hand and battered the old publican on the back, rapped his head, bruised his arms tickled his ribs, till he fell groaning on the floor; still the stick belaboured the prostrate man, nor would Jack call it off till he had got back the stolen ass and table. Then he galloped home on the ass, with the table on his shoulders, and the stick in his hand. When he arrived there he found his father was dead, so he brought his ass into the stable, and pulled its ears till he had filled the manger with money.

It was soon known through the town that Jack had returned rolling in wealth, and accordingly all the girls in the place set their caps at him. "Now," said Jack, "I shall marry the richest lass in the place; so tomorrow do you all come in front of my house with your money in your aprons."

Next morning the street was full of girls with aprons held out, and gold and silver in them; but Jack's own sweetheart was among them, and she had neither gold nor silver, nought but two copper pennies, that was all she had.

“Stand aside, lass;” said Jack to her, speaking roughly. “Thou hast no silver nor gold—stand off from the rest.” She obeyed, and the tears ran down her cheeks, and filled her apron with diamonds.

“Up stick and bang them!” exclaimed Jack; whereupon the cudgel leaped up, and running along the line of girls,

knocked them all on the heads and left them senseless on the pavement. Jack took all their money and poured it into his true love’s lap. “Now, lass,” he exclaimed, “thou art the richest, and I shall marry thee.”



Pallinghurst

Barrow

Grant Allen



Rudolph Reeve sat by himself on the Old Long Barrow on Pallinghurst Common. It was a September evening, and the sun was setting. The west was all aglow with a mysterious red light, very strange and lurid — a light that reflected itself in glowing purple on the dark brown heather and the dying bracken. Rudolph Reeve was a journalist and a man of science; but he had a poet's soul for all that, in spite of his avocations, neither of which is usually thought to tend towards the spontaneous development of a poetic temperament. He sat there long, watching the livid hues that incarnadined the sky — redder and fiercer than anything he ever remembered to have seen since the famous year of the Krakatoa sunsets — though he knew it was getting late, and he ought to have gone back long since to the manor-house to dress for dinner. Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, his hostess, the famous Woman's Rights woman, was always such a stickler for punctuality and dispatch and all the other unfeminine virtues! But in spite of Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, Rudolph Reeve sat on. There was something about that sunset and the lights on the bracken — something weird and unearthly — that positively fascinated him.

The view over the Common, which stands high and exposed, a veritable waste of heath and gorse, is strikingly wide and expansive. Pallinghurst Ring, or the "Old Long Barrow," a well-known landmark familiar by that name from time immemorial to all the country-side, crowns its actual summit, and commands from its top the surrounding hills far into the shadowy heart of Hampshire. On its terraced slope Rudolph sat and gazed out, with all the artistic pleasure of a poet or a painter (for he was a little of both) in the exquisite flush of the dying reflections from the dying sun upon the dying heather. He sat and wondered to himself why death is always so much more beautiful, so much more poetical, so much calmer than life — and why you invariably enjoy things so very much better when you know you ought to be dressing for dinner.

He was just going to rise, however, dreading the last-
ing wrath of Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, when of a sudden a very weird yet definite feeling caused him for one moment to pause and hesitate. Why he felt it he knew not; but even as he sat there on the grassy tumulus, covered close with short sward of subterranean clover, that curious, cunning plant that buries its own seeds by automatic action, he was aware, through an external sense, but by pure internal consciousness, of something or other living and moving within the barrow. He shut his eyes and listened. No; fancy, pure fancy! Not a sound broke the stillness of early evening, save the drone of insects — those dying insects, now beginning to fail fast before the first chill breath of approaching autumn. Rudolph opened his eyes again and looked down on the ground. In the little boggy hollow by his feet innumerable plants of sundew spread their murderous rosettes of sticky red

leaves, all bedewed with viscid gum, to catch and roll round the straggling flies that wrenched their tiny limbs in vain efforts to free themselves. But that was all. Nothing else was astir. In spite of sight and sound, however he was still deeply thrilled by this strange consciousness as of something living and moving in the barrow underneath; something living and moving — or was it moving and dead? Something crawling and creeping, as the long arms of the sundews crawled and crept around the helpless flies, whose juices they sucked out. A weird and awful feeling, yet strangely fascinating! He hated the vulgar necessity for going back to dinner. Why do people dine at all? So material! so commonplace! And the universe all teeming with strange secrets to unfold! He knew not why, but a fierce desire possessed his soul to stop and give way to this overpowering sense of the mysterious and the marvellous in the dark depths of the barrow.

With an effort he roused himself and put on his hat, which he had been holding in his hand for his forehead was burning. The sun had now long set, and Mrs. Bouverie-Barton dined at 7:30 punctually. He must rise and go home. Something unknown pulled him down to detain him. Once more he paused and hesitated. He was not a superstitious man, yet it seemed to him as if many strange shapes stood by unseen and watched with great eagerness to see whether he would rise and go away, or yield to the temptation of stopping and indulging his curious fancy. Strange! — he saw and heard absolutely nobody and nothing; yet he dimly realised that unseen figures were watching him close with bated breath and anxiously observing his every movement, as if intent to know whether he would rise and move on, or remain to investigate this causeless sensation.

For a minute or two he stood irresolute; and all the time he so stood the unseen bystanders held their breath and looked on in an agony of expectation. He could feel their outstretched necks; he could picture their strained attention. At last he broke away. "This is nonsense," he said aloud to himself, and turned slowly homeward. As he did so, a deep sigh, as of suspense relieved, but relieved in the wrong direction, seemed to rise — unheard, impalpable, spiritual — from the invisible crowd that gathered around him immaterial. Clutched hands seemed to stretch after him and try to pull him back. An unreel throng of angry and disappointed creatures seemed to follow him over the moor, uttering speechless imprecations on his head, in some unknown tongue — ineffable inaudible. This horrid sense of being followed by unearthly foes took absolute possession of Rudolph's mind. It might have been merely the lurid redness of the afterglow, or the loneliness of the moor, or the necessity for being back not one minute late for Mrs. Bouverie-Barton's dinner-hour; but, at any rate, he lost all self-control for the moment, and ran — ran wildly, at the very top of his speed, all the way from the barrow to the

door of the manor-house garden. There he stopped and looked round with a painful sense of his own stupid cowardice. This was positively childish: he had seen nothing, heard nothing, had nothing definite to frighten him; yet he had run from his own mental shadow, like the veriest schoolgirl, and was trembling still from the profundity of his sense that somebody unseen was pursuing and following him. "What a precious fool I am," he said to himself, half angrily, "to be so terrified at nothing! I'll go round there by-and-by just to recover my self-respect, and to show, at least, I'm not really frightened."

And even as he said it he was internally aware that his baffled foes, standing grinning their disappointment with gnashed teeth at the garden-gate, gave a chuckle of surprise, delight, and satisfaction at his altered intention..

There's nothing like light for dispelling superstitious terrors. Pallinghurst Manor-house was fortunately supplied with electric light, for Mrs. Bouverie-Barton was nothing if not intensely modern. Long before Rudolph had finished dressing for dinner, he was smiling once more to himself at his foolish conduct. Never in his life before — at least, since he was twenty — had he done such a thing; and he knew why he'd done it now. It was nervous breakdown. He had been overworking his brain in town with those elaborate calculations for his Fort-nightly article on "The Present State of Chinese Finances"; and Sir Arthur Boyd, the famous specialist on diseases of the nervous system, had earned three honest guineas cheap by recommending him "a week or two's rest and change in the country." That was why he had accepted Mrs. Bouverie-Barton's invitation to form part of her brilliant autumn party at Pallinghurst Manor, and that was also doubtless why he had been so absurdly frightened at nothing at all just now on the Common. Memorandum: Never to overwork his brain in future; it doesn't pay. And yet, in these days, how earn bread and cheese at literature without overworking it?

He went down to dinner, however, in very good spirits. His hostess was kind; she permitted him to take in that pretty American. Conversation with the soup turned at once on the sunset. Conversation with the soup is always on the lowest and most casual plane; it improves with the fish, and reaches its culmination with the sweets and the cheese, after which it declines again to the fruity level. "You were on the barrow about seven, Mr. Reeve," Mrs. Bouverie-Barton observed severely, when he spoke of the after-glow. "You watched that sunset close. How fast you must have walked home! I was almost half afraid you were going to be late for dinner."

Rudolph coloured up slightly; 'twas a girlish trick, unworthy of a journalist; but still he had it. "Oh, dear, no, Mrs. Bouverie-Barton," he answered gravely. "I may be foolish, but not, I hope, criminal. I know better than to do anything so weak and wicked as that at Pallinghurst

Manor. I do walk rather fast, and the sunset — well, the sunset was just too lovely."

"Elegant," the pretty American interposed, in her own language.

"It always is, this night every year," little Joyce said quietly, with the air of one who retails a well-known scientific fact. "It's the night, you know, when the light burns bright on the Old Long Barrow."

Joyce was Mrs. Bouverie-Barton's only child — a frail and pretty little creature, just twelve years old, very light and fairylike, but with a strange cowed look which, nevertheless, somehow curiously became her.

"What nonsense yon talk, my child!" her mother exclaimed, darting a look at Joyce which made her relapse forthwith into instant silence. "I'm ashamed of her, Mr. Reeve; they pick up such nonsense as this from their nurses." For Mrs. Bouverie-Barton was modern, and disbelieved in everything. 'Tis a simple creed; one clause concludes it.

But the child's words, though lightly whispered, had caught the quick ear of Archie Cameron, the distinguished electrician. He made a spring upon them at once; for the merest suspicion of the supernatural was to Cameron irresistible. "What's that, Joyce?" he cried, leaning forward across the table. "No, Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, I really must hear it. What day is this to-day, and what's that you just said about the sunset and the light on the Old Long Barrow?"

Joyce glanced pleadingly at her mother, and then again at Cameron. A very faint nod gave her grudging leave to proceed with her tale, under maternal disapprobation, for Mrs. Bouverie-Barton didn't carry her belief in Woman's Rights quite so far as to apply them to the case of her own daughter. We must draw a line somewhere.

Joyce hesitated and began. "Well, this is the night, you know," she said, "when the sun turns, or stands still, or crosses the tropic, or goes back again, or something."

Mrs. Bouverie-Barton gave a dry little cough. "The autumnal equinox," she interposed severely, "at which, of course, the sun does nothing of the sort you suppose. We shall have to have your astronomy looked after, Joyce; such ignorance is exhaustive. But go on with your myth, please, and get it over quickly."

"The autumnal equinox; that's just it," Joyce went on, unabashed. "I remember that's the word, for old Rachel, the gipsy, told me so. Well, on this day every year, a sort of glow comes up on the moor; oh! I know it does, mother, for I've seen it myself; and the rhyme about it goes—

*Every year on Michael's night
Pallinghurst Barrow burneth bright.*

Only the gipsy told me it was Baal's night before it was St. Michael's, and it was somebody else's night,

whose name I forget, before it was Baal's. And the somebody was a god to whom you must never sacrifice anything with iron, but always with flint or with a stone hatchet."

Cameron leaned back in his chair and surveyed the child critically. "Now, this is interesting," he said; "profoundly interesting. For here we get, what is always so much wanted first-hand evidence. And you're quite sure, Joyce, you've really seen it?"

"Oh! Mr. Cameron, how can you?" Mrs. Bouverie-Barton cried, quite pettishly; for even advanced ladies are still feminine enough at times to be distinctly pettish. "I take the greatest trouble to keep all such rubbish out of Joyce's way; and then you men of science come down here and talk like this to her, and undo all the good I've taken months in doing."

"Well, whether Joyce has ever seen it or not," Rudolph Reeve said gravely, "I can answer for it myself that I saw a very curious light on the Long Barrow tonight; and, furthermore, I fell a most peculiar sensation."

"What was that?" Cameron asked, bending over towards him eagerly. For all the world knows that Cameron, though a disbeliever in most things (except the Brush light), still retains a quaint tinge of Highland Scotch belief in a good ghost story.

"Why, as I was sitting on the barrow," Rudolph began, "just after sunset, I was dimly conscious of something stirring inside, not visible or audible, but—"

"Oh, I know, I know!" Joyce put in, leaning forward, with her eyes staring curiously; "a sort of a feeling that there was somebody somewhere, very faint and dim, though you couldn't see or hear them; they tried to pull you down, clutching at you like this: and when you ran away, frightened, they seemed to follow you and jeer at you. Great gibbering creatures! Oh, I know what all that is! I've been there, and felt it."

"Joyce!" Mrs. Bouverie-Barton put in with a warning frown, "what nonsense you talk! You're really too ridiculous. How can you suppose Mr. Reeve ran away — a man of science like him — from an imaginary terror?"

"Well, I won't quite say I ran away," Rudolph answered, sheepishly. "We never do admit these things, I suppose, after twenty. But I certainly did hurry home at the very top of my speed — not to be late for dinner, you know, Mrs. Bouverie-Barton; and I will admit, Joyce, between you and me only, I was conscious by the way of something very much like your grinning followers behind me."

Mrs. Bouverie-Barton darted him another look of intense displeasure. "I think," she said, in that chilly voice that has iced whole committees, "at a table like this, and with such thinkers around, we might surely find something rather better to discuss than such worn-out superstitions. Professor Spence, did you light upon any fresh palæoliths in the gravel-pit this morning?"

In the drawing-room, a little later, a small group collected by the corner bay, remotest from Mrs. Bouverie-Barton's own presidential chair, to hear Rudolph and Joyce compare experiences on the light above the barrow. When the two dreamers of dreams and seers of visions had finished, Mrs. Bruce, the esoteric Buddhist and hostess of Mahatmas (they often dropped in on her, it was said, quite informally, for afternoon tea) opened the flood-gates of her torrent speech with triumphant vehemence. "This is just what I should have expected," she said, looking round for a sceptic, that she might turn and rend him. "Novalis was right. Children are early men. They are freshest from the truth. They are freshest to us from the truth. Little souls just let loose from the free expanse of God's sky see more shall we adults do — at least, except a few of us. We ourselves, what are we but accumulated layers of phantasmata? Spirit-light rarely breaks in upon our grimed charnel of flesh. The dust of years overlies us. But the child, bursting new upon the dim world of Karma, trails clouds of glory from the beatific vision. So Wordsworth held; so the Masters of Tibet taught us, long ages before Wordsworth."

"It's curious," Professor Spence put in, with a scientific smile, restrained at the corners, "that all this should have happened to Joyce and to our friend Reeve at a long barrow. For you've seen MacRitchie's last work I suppose? No? Well, he's shown conclusively that long barrows, which are the graves of the small, squat people who preceded the inroad of Aryan invaders, are the real originals of all the fairy hills and subterranean palaces of popular legend. You know the old story of how Childe Roland to the dark tower came, of course, Cameron? Well, that dark tower was nothing more or less than a long barrow; perhaps Pallinghurst Barrow itself, perhaps some other, and Childe Roland went into it to rescue his sister Burd Ellen, who had been stolen by the fairy king, after the fashion of his kind, for a human sacrifice. The Picts, you recollect, were a deeply religious people, who believed in human sacrifice. They felt they derived from it high spiritual benefit. And the queerest part of it all is that in order to see the fairies you must go round the barrow widershins — that is to say, Miss Quackenboss, as Cameron will explain to you, the opposite way from the way of the sun — on this very night of all the year, Michaelmas Eve, which was the accepted old date of the autumnal equinox."

"All long barrows have a chamber of great stones in the centre, I believe," Cameron suggested, tentatively.

"Yes, all or nearly all; megalithic, you know; unwrought; and that chamber's the subterranean palace, lit up with the fairy light that's so constantly found in old stories of the dead, and which Joyce and you, alone among moderns, have been permitted to see, Reeve."

"It's a very odd fact," Dr. Porter, the materialist interposed musingly, "that the only ghosts people ever see

are the ghosts of a generation very, very close to them. One hears of lots of ghosts in eighteenth-century costumes, because everybody has a clear idea of wigs and small-clothes from pictures and fancy dresses. One hears of far fewer in Elizabethan dress, because the class most given to beholding ghosts are seldom acquainted with ruff's and farthingales; and one meets with none at all in Anglo-Saxon or Ancient British or Roman costumes, because those are only known to a comparatively small class of learned people, and ghosts, as a rule, avoid the learned — except you, Mrs. Bruce — as they would avoid prussic acid. Millions of ghosts of remote antiquity must swarm about the world, though, after a hundred years or thereabouts, they retire into obscurity and sense to annoy people with their nasty cold shivers. But the queer thing about these long-barrow ghosts is that they must be the spirits of men and women who died thousands and thousands of years ago, which is exceptional longevity for a spiritual being don't you think so, Cameron?"

"Europe must be chock-full of them!" the pretty American assented, smiling, "though America hasn't had time, so far, to collect any considerable population of spirits."

But Mrs. Bruce was up in arms at once against such covert levity, and took the field in full force for her beloved spectres. "No, no," she said "Dr. Porter there you mistake your subject. You should read what I have written in 'The Mirror of Trismegistus.' Man is the focus of the glass of his own senses. There are other landscapes in the fifth and sixth dimensions of space than the one presented to him. As Carlyle said truly, each eye sees in all things just what each eye brings with it the power of seeing. And this is true spiritually as well as physically. To Newton and Newton's dog Diamond what a different universe! One saw the great vision of universal gravitation, the other saw — a little mouse under a chair, as the wise old nursery rhyme so philosophically puts it. Nursery rhymes summarise for us the gain of centuries. Nothing was ever destroyed, nothing was ever changed, and nothing new is ever created. All the spirits of all that is, or was, or ever will be, people the universe everywhere, unseen, around us, and each of us sees of them those only he himself is adapted to seeing. The rustic or the clown meets no ghosts of any sort save the ghosts of the persons he knows about otherwise; if a man like yourself saw a ghost at all — which isn't likely — for you starve your spiritual side by blindly shutting your eyes to one whole aspect of nature — you'd be just as likely to see the ghost of a Stone Age chief as the ghost of a Georgian or Elizabethan exquisite."

"Did I catch the word ghost?" Mrs. Bouverie-Barton put in, coming up unexpectedly with her angry glower. "Joyce, my child, go to bed. This is no talk for you. And don't go chilling yourself by standing at the window in

your nightdress, looking out on the Common to search for the light on the Old Long Barrow, which is all pure moonshine. You nearly caught your death of cold last year with that nonsense. It's always so. These superstitions never do any good to anyone."

And, indeed, Rudolph felt a faint glow of shame himself at having discussed such themes in the hearing of that nervous and high-strung little creature..

In the course of the evening, Rudolph's head began to ache, as, to say the truth, it often did; for was he not an author? and sufferance is the badge of all our tribe. His head generally ached: the intervals he employed upon magazine articles. He knew that headache well; it was the worst neuralgic kind — the wet-towel variety — the sort that keeps you tossing the whole night long without hope of respite. About eleven o'clock, when the men went into the smoking-room, the pain became unendurable. He called Dr. Porter aside. "Can't you give me anything to relieve it?" he asked piteously, after describing his symptoms.

"Oh, certainly," the doctor answered with that brisk medical confidence we all know so well. "I'll bring you up a draught that will put that all right in less than half an hour. What Mrs. Bruce calls Soma — the fine old crusted remedy of our Aryan ancestor; there's nothing like it for cases of nervous inanition."

Rudolph went up to his room, and the doctor followed him a few minutes later with a very small phial of a very thick green viscid liquid. He poured ten drops carefully into a measured medicine-glass, and filled it up with water. It amalgamated badly. "Drink that off," he said, with the magisterial air of the cunning leech. And Rudolph drank it.

"I'll leave you the bottle," the doctor went on, laying it down on the dressing-table, "only use it with caution. Ten drops in two hours if the pain continues. Not more than ten, recollect. It's a powerful narcotic — I daresay you know its name: it's *Cannabis Indica*."

Rudolph thanked him inarticulately, and flung himself on the bed without undressing. He had brought up a book with him — that delicious volume, Joseph Jacobs's *English Fairy Tales* — and he tried in some vague way to read the story of Childe Roland, to which Professor Spence had directed his attention. But his trend ached so much he could hardly read it, he only gathered with difficulty that Childe Roland had been instructed by witch or warlock to come to a green hill surrounded with terrace-rings — like Pallinghurst Barrow — to walk round it thrice, widershins, saying each time—

*Open door, open door,
And let me come in,*

—and when the door opened to enter unabashed the fairy king's palace. And the third time the door did open; and Childe Roland entered a court, all lighted with a

fairy light or gloaming; and then he went through a long passage, till he came at last to two wide stone doors; and beyond them lay a hall — stately, glorious, magnificent — where Burd Ellen sat combing her golden hair with a comb of amber. And the moment she saw her brother, up she stood, and she said

*Woe worth the day, ye luckless fool,
Or ever that ye were born;
For come the King of Elfland in
Your fortune is forlorn.*

When Rudolph had read so far his head ached so much he could read no further; so he laid down the book, and reflected once more in some half-conscious mood on Mrs. Bruce's theory that each man could see only the ghosts he expected. That seemed reasonable enough, for according to our faith is it unto us always. If so, then these ancient and savage ghosts of the dim old Stone Age, before bronze or iron, must still haunt grassy barrows under the waving pines where legend declared they were long since buried; and the mystic light over Pallinghurst moor must be the local evidence and symbol of their presence.

How long he lay there he hardly quite knew; but the clock struck twice, and his head was aching so fiercely now that he helped himself plentifully to a second dose of the thick green mixture. His hand shook too much to be Puritanical to a drop or two. For a while it relieved him, then the pain grew worse again. Dreamily he moved over to the big north oriel to cool his brow with the fresh night air. The window stood open. As he gazed out a curious sight met his eye. At another oriel in the wing, which ran in an L-shaped bend from the part of the house where he had been put, he saw a child's white face gaze appealingly across to him. It was Joyce, in her white nightdress, peering with all her might, in spite of her mother's prohibition, on the mystic common. For a second she started. Her eyes met his. Slowly she raised one pale forefinger and pointed. Her lips opened to frame an inaudible word; but he read it by sight. "Look!" she said simply. Rudolph looked where she pointed.

A faint blue light hung lambent over the Old Long Barrow. It was ghostly and vague, like matches rubbed on the palm. It seemed to rouse and call him.

He glanced towards Joyce. She waved her hand to the barrow. Her lips said "Go." Rudolph was now in that strange semi-mesmeric state of self-induced hypnotism when a command, of whatever sort or by whomever given, seems to compel obedience. Trembling he rose, and taking his bed-room candle in his hand, descended the stair noiselessly. Then, walking on tip-toe across the tile-paved hall, he reached his hat from the rack, and opening the front door stole out into the garden.

The Soma had steadied his nerves and supplied him with false courage, but even in spite of it he felt a weird

and creepy sense of mystery and the supernatural. Indeed, he would have turned back even now, had he not chanced to look up and see Joyce's pale face still pressed close against the window and Joyce's white hand still motioning him mutely onward. He looked once more in the direction where she pointed. The spectral light now burnt clearer and bluer, and more unearthly than ever, and the illimitable moor seemed haunted from end to end by innumerable invisible and uncanny creatures.

Rudolph groped his way on. His goal was the barrow. As he went, speechless voices seemed to whisper unknown tongues encouragingly in his ear; horrible shapes of elder creeds appeared to crowd round him and tempt him with beckoning fingers to follow them. Alone, erect, across the darkling waste, stumbling now and again over roots of gorse and heather, but steadied, as it seemed, by invisible hands, he staggered slowly forward, till at last, with aching head and trembling feet, he stood beside the immemorial grave of the savage chieftain. Away over in the east the white moon was just rising.

After a moment's pause, he began to walk round the tumulus. But something clogged and impeded him. His feet wouldn't obey his will; they seemed to move of themselves in the opposite direction. Then all at once he remembered he had been trying to go the way of the sun, instead of widershins. Steadying himself, and opening his eyes, he walked in the converse sense. All at once his feet moved easily, and the invisible attendants chuckled to themselves so loud that he could almost hear them. After the third round his lips parted, and he murmured the mystic words: "Open door! Open door! Let me come in." Then his head throbbed worse than ever with exertion and giddiness, and for two or three minutes more he was unconscious of anything.

When he opened his eyes again a very different sight displayed itself before him. Instantly he was aware that the age had gone back upon its steps ten thousand years, as the sun went back upon the dial of Ahaz, he stood face to face with a remote antiquity. Planes of existence faded; new sights floated over him; new worlds were penetrated; new ideas, yet very old, undulated centrally towards him from the universal flat of time and space and matter and motion. He was projected into another sphere and saw by fresh senses. Everything was changed, and he himself changed with it.

The blue light over the barrow now shone clear as day, though infinitely more mysterious. A passage lay open through the grassy slope into a rude stone corridor. Though his curiosity by this time was thoroughly aroused, Rudolph shrank with a terrible shrinking from his own impulse to enter this grim black hole, which led at once, by an oblique descent, into the bowels of the earth. But he couldn't help himself. For, O God! looking round him, he saw, to his infinite terror, alarm, and awe, a ghostly throng of naked and hideous savages. They

were spirits, yet savages. Eagerly they jostled and hustled him, and crowded round him in wild groups, exactly as they had done to the spiritual sense a little earlier in the evening, when he couldn't see them. But now he saw them clearly with the outer eye; saw them as grinning and hateful barbarian shadows, neither black nor white, but tawny-skinned and low-browed; their tangled hair falling unkempt in matted locks about their receding foreheads; their jaws large and fierce; their eyebrows shaggy and protruding like a gorilla's; their loins just girt with a few scraps of torn skin their whole mien inexpressibly repulsive and bloodthirsty.

They were savages, yet they were ghosts. The two most terrible and dreaded foes of civilised experience seemed combined at once in them. Rudolph Reeve crouched powerless in their intangible hands; for they seized him roughly with incorporeal fingers, and pushed him bodily into the presence of their sleeping chieftain. As they did so they raised loud peals of discordant laughter. It was hollow, but it was piercing. In that hateful sound the triumphant whoop of the Red Indian and the weird mockery of the ghost were strangely mingled into some appalling harmony.

Rudolph allowed them to push him in; they were too many to resist; and the Soma had sucked all strength out of his muscles. The women were the worst: ghastly hags of eld, witches with pendent breasts and bloodshot eyes, they whirled round him in triumph, and shouted aloud in a tongue he had never before heard, though he understood it instinctively, "A victim! A victim! We hold him! We have him!"

Even in the agonised horror of that awful moment Rudolph knew why he understood those words, unheard till then. They were the first language of our race — the natural and instinctive mother-tongue of humanity.

They haled him forward by main force to the central chamber, with hands and arms and ghostly shreds of buffalo-hide. Their wrists compelled him as the magnet compels the iron bar. He entered the palace. A dim phosphorescent light, like the light of a churchyard or of decaying paganism, seemed to illumine it faintly. Things loomed dark before him; but his eyes almost instantly adapted themselves to the gloom, as the eyes of the dead on the first night in the grave adapt themselves by inner force to the strangeness of their surroundings. The royal hall was built up of cyclopean stones, each as big as the head of some colossal *Sesostris*. They were of ice-worn granite and a dusky-gray sandstone, rudely piled on one another, and carved in relief with representations of serpents, concentric lines, interlacing zigzags, and the mystic swastika. But all these things Rudolph only saw vaguely, if he saw them at all; his attention was too much concentrated on devouring fear and the horror of his situation.

In the very centre a skeleton sat crouching on the floor in some loose, huddled fashion. Its legs were doubled up, its hands clasped round its knees, its grinning teeth had long been blackened by time or by the indurated blood of human victims. The ghosts approached it with strange reverence, in impish postures.

"See! We bring you a slave, great king!" they cried in the same barbaric tongue — all clicks and gutturals. "For this is the holy night of your father, the Sun, when he turns him about on his yearly course through the stars and goes south to leave us. We bring you a slave to renew your youth. Rise! Drink his hot blood! Rise! Kill and eat him!"

The grinning skeleton turned its head and regarded Rudolph from its eyeless orbs with a vacant glance of hungry satisfaction. The sight of human meat seemed to create a soul beneath the ribs of death in some incredible fashion. Even as Rudolph, held fast by the immaterial hands of his ghastly captors, looked and trembled for his fate, too terrified to cry out or even to move and struggle, he beheld the hideous thing rise and assume a shadowy shape, all pallid blue light, like the shapes of his jailers. Bit by bit, as he gazed, the skeleton seemed to disappear, or rather to fade into some unsubstantial form, which was nevertheless more human, more corporeal, more horrible than the dry bones it had come from. Naked and yellow like the rest, it wore round its dim waist just an apron of dry grass, or, what seemed to be such, while over its shoulders hung the ghost of a bearskin mantle. As it rose, the other spectres knocked their foreheads low on the ground before it, and grovelled with their long locks in the ageless dust, and uttered elfin cries of inarticulate homage.

The great chief turned, grinning, to one of his spectral henchmen. "Give a knife!" he said curtly, for all that these strange shades uttered was snapped out in short, sharp sentences, and in a monosyllabic tongue, like the bark of jackals or the laugh of the striped hyena among the graves at midnight.

The attendant, bowing low once more, handed his liege a flint flake, very keen-edged, but jagged, a rude and horrible instrument of barbaric manufacture. But what terrified Rudolph most was the fact that this flake was no ghostly weapon, no immaterial shred, but a fragment of real stone, capable of inflicting a deadly gash or long, torn wound. Hundreds of such fragments, indeed, lay loose on the concreted floor of the chamber, some of them roughly chipped, others ground and polished. Rudolph had seen such things in museums many times before; with a sudden rush of horror he recognised now for the first time in his life with what object the savages of that far-off day had buried them with their dead in the chambered barrows.

With a violent effort he wetted his parched lips with his tongue, and cried out thrice in his agony the one word "Mercy!"

At that sound the savage king burst into a loud and fiendish laugh. It was a hideous laugh, halfway between a wild beast's and a murderous maniac's: it echoed through the long hall like the laughter of devils when they succeed in leading a fair woman's soul to eternal perdition. "What does he say?" the king cried, in the same transparently natural words, whose import Rudolph could understand at once. "How like birds they talk, these white-faced men, whom we get for our only victims since the years grew foolish! 'Mu-mu-mu-moo!' they say, 'Mu-mu-mu-moo!' more like frogs than men and women!"

Then it came over Rudolph instinctively, through the maze of his terror, that he could understand the lower tongue of these elfish visions because he and his ancestors had once passed through it, but they could not understand his, because it was too high and too deep for them.

He had little time for thought, however. Fear bounded his horizon. The ghosts crowded round him, gibbering louder than before. With wild cries and heathen screams they began to dance about their victim. Two advanced with measured skips and tied his hands and feet with a ghostly cord. It cut into the flesh like the stab of a great sorrow. They bound him to a stake which Rudolph felt conscious was no earthly and materiel wood but a piece of intangible shadow; yet he could no more escape from it than from the iron chain of an earthly prison. On each side the stake two savage hags, long-haired, ill-favoured, inexpressibly cruel-looking, set two small plants of Enchanter's Nightshade. Then a fierce orgiastic shout went up to the low roof from all the assembled people. Rushing forward together, they covered his body with what seemed to be oil and butter; they hung grave-flowers round his neck; they quarrelled among themselves with clamorous cries for hairs and rags torn from his head and clothing. The women, in particular, whirled round him with frantic Bacchanalian gestures, crying aloud as they circled: "O great chief! O my king! we offer you this victim; we offer you new blood to prolong your life. Give us in return sound sleep, dry graves, sweet dreams, fair seasons!"

They cut themselves with flint knives. Ghostly ichor streamed copious.

The king meanwhile kept close guard over his victim, whom he watched with hungry eyes of hideous cannibal longing. Then, at a given signal, the crowd of ghosts stood suddenly still. There was an awesome pause. The men gathered outside, the women crouched low in a ring close up to him. Dimly at that moment Rudolph noticed almost without noticing it that each of them had a wound on the side of his own skull; and he understood

why: they had themselves been sacrificed in the dim long ago to bear their king company to the world of spirits. Even as he thought that thought, the men and women with a loud whoop raised hands aloft in unison. Each grasped a sharp flake, which he brandished savagely. The king gave the signal by rushing at him with a jagged and sawlike knife. It descended on Rudolph's head. At the same moment the others rushed forward, crying aloud in their own tongue "Carve the flesh from his bones! Slay him! hack him to pieces!"

Rudolph bent his trend to avoid the blows. He cowered in abject terror. Oh! what fear would any Christian ghost have inspired by the side of these incorporeal pagan savages! Ah! mercy! mercy! They would tear him limb from limb! They would rend him in pieces!

At that instant he raised his eyes, and, as by a miracle of fate, saw another shadowy form floating vague before him. It was the form of a man in sixteenth-century costume, very dim and uncertain. It might have been a ghost — it might have been a vision — but it raised its shadowy hand and pointed towards the door. Rudolph saw it was unguarded. The savages were now upon him, their ghostly breath blew chill on his cheek. "Show them iron!" cried the shadow in an English voice. Rudolph struck out with both elbows and made a fierce effort for freedom. It was with difficulty he roused himself, but at last he succeeded. He drew his pocket-knife and opened it. At sight of the cold steel, which no ghost or troll or imp can endure to behold, the savages fell back, muttering. But 'twas only for a moment. Next instant, with a howl of vengeance even louder than before, they crowded round him and tried to intercept him. He shook them off with wild energy, though they jostled and hustled him, and struck him again and again with their sharp flint edges. Blood was flowing freely now from his hands and arms — red blood of this world; but still he fought his way out by main force with his sharp steel blade towards the door and the moonlight. The nearer he got to the exit, the thicker and closer the ghosts pressed around, as if conscious that their power was bounded by their own threshold. They avoided the knife, meanwhile; with superstitious terror. Rudolph elbowed them fiercely aside, and lunging at them now and again, made his way to the door. With one supreme effort he tore himself madly out, and stood once more on the open heath, shivering like a greyhound. The ghosts gathered grinning by the open vestibule, their fierce teeth, like a wild beast's, confessing their impotent anger. But Rudolph started to run, all wearied as he was, and ran a few hundred yards before he fell and fainted. He dropped on a clump of white heather by a sandy ridge, and lay there unconscious till well on into the morning..

When the people from the Manor-house picked him up next day, he was hot and cold, terribly pale from fear, and mumbling incoherently. Dr. Porter had him put to

bed without a moment's delay. "Poor fellow!" he said, leaning over him, "he's had a very narrow escape indeed of a bad brain fever. I oughtn't to have exhibited Cannabis in his excited condition; or, at any rate, if I did, I ought, at least, to have watched its effect more closely. He must be kept very quiet now, and on no account whatever, Nurse, must either Mrs. Bruce or Mrs. Bouverie-Barton be allowed to come near him."

But late in the afternoon Rudolph sent for Joyce.

The child came creeping in with an ashen face. "Well?" she murmured, soft and low, taking her seat by the bedside; "so the King of the Barrow very nearly had you!"

"Yes," Rudolph answered, relieved to find there was somebody to whom he could talk freely of his terrible adventure. "He nearly had me. But how did you come to know it?"

"About two by the clock," the child replied, with white lips of terror, "I saw the fires on the moor burn brighter and bluer: and then I remembered the words of a terrible old rhyme the gipsy woman taught me —

*Pallinghurst Barrow — Pallinghurst Barrow!
Every year one heart thou'lt harrow!
Pallinghurst Ring — Pallinghurst Ring!
A bloody man is thy ghostly king.
Men's bones he breaks, and sucks their marrow
In Pallinghurst Ring on Pallinghurst Barrow.*

— and just as I thought it, I saw the lights burn terribly bright and clear for a second, and I shuddered for horror. Then they died down low at once, and there was moaning on the moor, cries of despair, as from a great crowd cheated, and at that I knew that you were not to be the Ghost-King's victim."



Druid

Without a Home

Chapter 6

Buried Alive

Call of the Shieldmaiden



The weather was cold and crisp. The wind that had buffeted the thatched roofs that morning was gone, and Degore felt it was the ideal time to go out and explore the winter landscape. It was midday and he had just had an excellent lunch of pigeon pie, dripping with rich gravy. Clancy had abandoned him in order to have a nap and Pawdraig could not be budged from his spot in front of the fire, and so he sallied forth alone. The snow had covered the open fields, with drifts and embankments here and there where the wind had shifted the snow and piled it up. Only the grey spires of the cathedral stood tall and solid amidst the endless expanse of white.

Degore went out to the sheep, which munched their hay in the paddocks and pawed at the ground, seeking what little grass might be left. He clambered over the stone wall that surrounded the graveyard and moved on past the sheep. A small campfire caught his eye. A couple of shepherds were crouched by it, and as Degore approached one of them got to his feet, picking up an axe as he did so. Degore recognised him as new to the abbey, a druid who had been many years out in the world and had only recently returned.

Grudaire smiled at him. "I am going to break the ice on the stream, want to come?" He handed the axe to Degore. The man's face was mostly hidden by his hood but the beard that spilled out was grey.

The man walked intermittently fast and slow, as if not sure what pace Degore could comfortably keep up with. His crook poked at the ground ahead of him as he walked.

"I heard you are from the forest, the big one down south," the man said. "I have been there many times."

"Yes," Degore replied, shifting the heavy axe to the other arm, "but I only really remember the dragon bringing me here."

"A dragon, you say?" The man smiled, his hood had slipped back and Degore could now see his kind brown eyes—which, he found himself thinking, were somehow familiar. "I do envy you, flying must be fun."

They reached the gentle stream which usually meandered across the plateau. Now it was covered by a plate of ice.

"We cleared it this morning, but the wind froze it over again, and those sheep have emptied the trough already," the Druid told Degore. He took up the axe and bashed the ice with the butt. The ice splintered away under the firm blows and the running water underneath cleared the stream.

"Wipe this dry with the hay," the Druid instructed, handing over the axe, and taking up a bucket and filling the trough that stood nearby. "Sheep do not like to drink from running water," he informed Degore.

The two slowly walked around the flock, the Druid pointing out how the early spring lambs were dealing

better with the winter weather than those born late in the summer.

"Look!" Degore exclaimed. He had wandered out beyond the sheep's hoofprints and come upon some tracks. "Is this a dog?" He looked down at the big prints, like Pawdraig's but massive. The outline of the sharp claws was clear, and he shivered just a little.

The Druid bent down and looked closely at them. "No, this is a wolf!" He stood up and looked over towards the forest where the footprints led to. "This is worrisome!" He motioned to Degore to follow him and they hurried back to the other shepherd at the fire.

"We might have to have a few more men watching tonight," the Druid said.

The other man nodded, "Was it the tracks of one wolf or a pack?"

"Just one, but more will likely come," the Druid said.

As the men talked Degore slowly moved away through the flock of sheep, and back to the tracks. He bent down to examine them, and a thrill of excitement ran through him. The last few days had brought bad weather and he had been cooped up inside crumbling dried herbs. He still smelt of parsley. But here was the opportunity for adventure.

He swiftly followed the tracks across the snow-laden pasture, and before he knew it, he was at the edge of the forest. The plateau had great expanses of open land, but to the east lay a patch of forest, far older than the forest that Degore was born in. Down there the trees were tall and straight, whereas here they had massive trunks and moss-covered bark. Now those trees loomed up before him, dark, strange and intriguing. The tracks were a bit harder to see, since they wove around in between the trees.

The forest smelt different to how it did in the summer, the chill of the air made it hard to pick up any scent, and what little he could smell was of wet trees and pine needles.

The tracks seemed to disappear as the trees were so thick above him the snow could not get through. He straightened and looked around. A lone autumn leaf fluttered helplessly on a bare branch beside him in the gentle puff of wind that occasionally broke the deep silence.

A strange animal scent lingered in the air as he walked deeper. Then came another scent he had not smelt for many years.

Suddenly he remembered the terror and panic, and the image of his mother lying in the forest flashed before him. He jerked back as a wolf stalked forward from the trees and stood facing him.

He was taller than any wolf now, but the snarling mouth still sent chills down his spine. He clutched the axe tightly in his gloved hands.

The wolf advanced slowly. Its eyes darted over him, as if looking for a point of weakness. They both knew he was young and inexperienced with fighting, but no wolf was keen to be injured or expend energy pointlessly.

Degore moved back as the wolf advanced. Any heroic visions he'd had of taking it down had faded when he saw how fit and agile the animal was. Its eyes were cold and calculating and were always on him, looking for an opportunity to strike. It moved to the left and then the right, as if herding him backwards.

His back was soon pressed up against a tree and the only thing left to do was wave the axe at the wolf. The wolf sat down just out of reach and yawned. Degore felt worried, was the wolf intending to just sit there and wait for him to freeze?

He thought about calling for help, but he was deep in the forest and he felt certain no one would hear him.

Time passed, with Degore staring at the wolf, slowly getting colder, and the wolf looking bored but menacing.

A large dark form suddenly entered the clearing. It startled both Degore and the wolf. The wolf leapt back, but Degore felt relieved. It was a grey dragon with friendly brown eyes.

The wolf snarled and shrunk back quickly, but the dragon lunged forwards. The wolf turned to flee but the dragon's talons were upon it in an instant.

The wolf's howl turned to a gurgle as the large claws tore his head from his trunk. The body lay limp on the stained snow. The dragon turned to Degore. "Why are you out here all alone?" he asked, casually.

"I wanted to find the wolf, he was inspecting our sheep last night." Degore stamped his feet on the ground to warm them up.

"It is not wise to go wolf-hunting alone." The dragon looked over at the dead wolf. "That creature could tear you apart."

Degore shivered and nodded "I did not think."

The dragon laughed, "That was me when I was young too! Now you get along home before you freeze." The dragon turned and vanished into the forest.

"But what is your name?" Degore called after him. "This is the second time we have met and I want to know! Last time we met you were dangling off the edge of a cliff!"

"I am the Ferminator." The dragon appeared again and draped his tail around Degore's shoulders. "I am sure we will meet again, as long as you avoid being eaten by wild animals." The dragon chuckled at himself and hurried off.

The silence of the forest returned and Degore looked around for his own tracks to follow back out of the forest. He heard a scratching sound in a fallen tree nearby.

He hurried over and peered into the hollow created by the upturned roots. It was filled with faded autumn leaves which moved ominously.

The beak of a huge eagle slowly emerged from the leaves and Degore stepped back carefully. Tufted ears like a horse's followed, and his eyes lit up as he took a further step back. It could only be a gryphon! He had heard stories about how they could spit poisoned saliva a great distance—though now that he saw one he wondered just how effectively it could spit through a beak.

The creature was quite small, only as tall as the dogs the shepherds used to herd the sheep, but Degore caught a glimpse of an impressive wingspan as it shook the leaves off the feathers that covered the upper part of its body. It swished its tufted tail as it hopped up out of the leaves. Degore picked up a huge stick as he took in the back part of its body and hind legs like a lion's.

"Thank you so much." The voice was grateful, but had a sneer to it.

Degore looked uncertainly at the strange animal in front of him.

"Dragon got your tongue, boy?" the gryphon asked. "I am glad you have saved me from the wolf."

"But couldn't you take down the wolf?" Degore asked, puzzled.

"I used to reign supreme over them," the gryphon said, "but they grow clever and now when they find you too tired to fly they will hunt you down."

Degore shivered. "Such nasty animals. But don't thank me, thank the dragon!"

"Your dragon would not have come if it were not for you." The gryphon drew near the wolf's cooling body.

"My dragon?" Degore was taken aback. "but I have only met him once before and only now know his name!"

The gryphon chuckled, and bowing low to Degore he limped quickly away.

The quietness of the forest hit him again, and he hurried back past the leaf-filled hollow and through the darkening forest towards the open space which seemed full of light in comparison. As he rushed past the last tree he almost bumped into someone. It was the Druid.

"Are you okay?" he asked. His eyes were comforting, and Degore suddenly realised how stressed he was feeling.

"The wolf is dead." He sank to the ground.

The Druid got down beside him and took some jerky out of his bag. "Have this, it will restore your strength."

Between mouthfuls of the salty dried beef he told the Druid of the events which had just taken place, and ended his story with an inquiry as to the potency of gryphon saliva.

The Druid had listened carefully to his story. "If you get it in any cuts or eat it, you will fall into a faint and die. But small quantities on the skin will just make you feel numb for a few days." The Druid stood up, "Now, let's go back there and skin that wolf! You have saved us a lot of potential trouble from that quarter, so we should be able to reward you with a nice skin for your bed."

They went back to the wolf's carcass and the Druid set to work at once, knowing that when the carcass cooled it would become harder to skin. He worked quickly and was soon finished.

As they crunched back over the frozen meadow towards the Abbey, Degore felt tired to the bone. The outline of the cathedral spires was the only thing visible in the dark sky and the thought of food and a warm bed kept him going. The Druid carried the wolfskin in a bundle over his shoulder. They went past the fold where the scent of sheep was strong and there was bleating as the animals settled down for the night. Fires had been lit on all sides and the men were prepared for any wolf attack. The Druid spoke some words to the men in passing but Degore was too tired to listen. He was at his front door in no time at all and Freyja opened up to the Druid's knock.

"Why are you out so late?!" she exclaimed. "I was about to send Uhtred to look for you!"

Uhtred was standing by the fire and he helped Degore out of his coat. Freyja asked the Druid to stay for dinner. Degore ate his stew ravenously, while the Druid explained what had taken place.

"If you go out to fight wolves like that alone again, I will make you crumble herbs for the rest of the winter!" Freyja warned him.

A week passed, and Degore went out again. He felt a strange pull towards the forest and before he knew it he found himself wandering there again in the late afternoon.

"No! He can't be dead!" Freyja cried in despair.

Uhtred cleared his throat; his voice was affected by sorrow. "We found him cold and lifeless this morning."

"No, it cannot be!" she sobbed. "Not my boy!"

Uhtred swallowed hard. The men who stood around the grave bore sober expressions and were silent.

"You idiots!" came a cold sneering voice.

They all turned. From behind the wall that surrounded the graveyard appeared a gryphon. He came close but stayed out of reach of the mourners. Poison dripped from his beak, but at a mere 4 feet tall he did not want to be taken on by five strong men.

"I spat on him," the gryphon giggled, "but he is not dead."

Freyja moved threateningly towards him, but Uhtred held her back. "How dare you!"

The gryphon giggled again, but sobered up and wilted under her gaze. "It was an accident, he is my friend."

Freyja's eyes burned into the gryphon's soul. He shifted uncomfortably. "He saved me from a wolf once, but he got too close and I did not mean to spit!"

"And how are you going to fix it?" Although quiet, Freyja's voice was chilling.

The gryphon threw back his head and gave a loud cry, something like nails scraping across a piece of metal, but with a lilt and a rhythm. It penetrated the listeners' souls. It was melancholic and melodious, yet gave them a strong feeling of disgust.

There was movement among the trees of the forest behind the graveyard, and a dragon poked its head out from the undergrowth. He was an elderly dragon, whose once-bright silver scales had begun to fade to a matte grey. He regarded the little party for a moment or two, and then launched himself up into the air and glided across the gap between them, coming to land beside the wall. Stepping over it with ease, he came up behind the gryphon, who shifted uncomfortably. He took in the fresh grave, the sombre faces of the men and Freyja's grief-stricken and angry expression.

"They have buried him alive!" cackled the gryphon.

The strong claws of the dragon quickly scooped the soil out of the grave. Gently he lifted out the simple wooden coffin. Freyja rushed forwards and pushed the lid aside.

The fresh air rushed into the coffin and hit Degore in the face, waking him. Feebly he opened an eye. Freyja was stroking his hair; the silver of her own glowed in the setting sun making her seem surrounded by a halo. Behind her was Uhtred. His bronze hair never changed despite the deepening lines in his face. Degore looked about and noticed he was in a coffin.

Degore grinned foolishly up at them. "You are going to have to try harder than that to get rid of me," he said.

"Oh you!" Freyja laughed, then sobered up; "No, you will live a long and fulfilling life."

The men gathered around and lifted up the coffin. Freyja followed them as they wound their way through centuries of gravestones. They went past graves so old the runes were barely legible, and past the fresh grave of a stillborn baby buried only a week ago. Freyja opened up the gate of the graveyard, and Degore was carried out of the land of the dead.

Uhtred turned to the dragon, who had the gryphon by the back of the neck. The gryphon was frightened but did not struggle.

“Give me the cup.” The dragon motioned to the cup Uhtred had on his belt, which was duly handed over.

The dragon raised it to the gryphon's mouth and held it there until his captive had spat out enough poison to fill the vessel to the brim. “Now go, and never return!” commanded the dragon as he released his grasp.

Not needing to be told twice, the gryphon made a beeline for the graveyard wall and then flew over it and away into the forest.

The dragon placed the cup down on a nearby stone. “Your grandfather left a recipe for the antidote to gryphon poison on the chimney piece in your cathedral.” With his front claws he motioned towards the grand building.

Uhtred looked deeply into the eyes of the dragon. It was as if he could almost see the past. The dragon bowed his head with respect and Uhtred bowed in return. Then the dragon was gone. Uhtred watched as he flew over the cathedral spires and away toward the setting sun in the west.

The scent of rain was suddenly heavy in the air and Uhtred looked to the east to see the rain clouds gathered over the forest. Quickly he picked up the cup of poison, and hurrying around the gravestones he ran into the cathedral.

The only things written anywhere near the chimney were a verse on the fires of hell which hung over the fireplace, very appropriately Uhtred had always thought, and a short poem about a flower that grew in great clumps in the knot gardens around the abbey:

*White flowers grow in abundance
Mixed with that which is pungent
Will make the darkness redundant*

So that which brings pain will also expunge it

Taking the cup of poison he went to Degore's room, where the lad lay feverish and making corny jokes.

“I have this cup of poison,” Uhtred whispered to Freyja. “The dragon said the writing on the chimney in the cathedral held the recipe to the antidote.”

Some hope came to Freyja's face. “So we can restore him to full health? The only other case I know of someone surviving involved them being bedridden and insensible for the rest of their life.”

Uhtred nodded. “I think we can save him. Could you please grab me a bunch of the white flowers that are growing around the place? They are mentioned in the riddle.”

Freyja nodded and hurried from the room. Stoking the fire in the small fireplace, Uhtred placed the cup of poison against the coals.

Freyja appeared with a bunch of flowers. “What is the recipe?”

“The verse above the fireplace goes: ‘If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved: yet as by fire.’ And so I am interpreting it as an instruction to heat this stuff up... I am sure I also heard Grandfather mention it once.”

Freyja looked at the cup on the coals and sniffed. “It is starting to smell quite bad.”

“What?” Uhtred sniffed the air. “It is! Good, the poem talked about mixing the flowers with something pungent.” Quickly he snapped off the flower heads and dropped them into the cup. They seemed to dissolve into the goop, which was now becoming more watery.

Freyja wiped Degore's feverish head. She looked with concern over at the cup on the coals, whose scent was growing stronger by the second.

Uhtred looked in the cup. “It has gone clear now.” Removing it from the coals, he poked a cautious finger into it. “Well, it's not causing the numbing sensation that people report the venom gives them.”

“That is good,” said Freyja, “but what now?”

Before she could protest Uhtred took a great gulp of the liquid.

“Uhtred!” she gasped in horror. They looked each other in the eyes for a long time. Freyja could not suppress the terrifying thought that she was about to watch her husband of 30 years drop dead in front of her. Then Uhtred smiled.

“It has not killed me, let us try it on the boy.” He went over to the bed.

Uhtred held up Degore's head and Freyja held the cup to his lips. He took some sips and a change was immediate. The fever dropped away and he just looked exhausted and tired.

“It worked!” Freyja was delighted, she jumped up and hugged Uhtred. “But do not test poison out like that again.” She shook her finger at him. “Please stay with him while I fetch him some food.”

“What poison?” Degore asked after she had left the room.

“The dragon told me to follow the poem on the cathedral mantelpiece, and gave me a cup of gryphon poison. The result was the brew that cured you.”

“That is so cool!” Degore's voice was weak but excited. “I never knew what that poem meant before. Do you know who wrote it?”

“The dragon said it was my grandfather,” said Uhtred. He sat down beside the bed.

“I heard that you were named after him,” said Degore as he leaned back on his pillow.

“Not my first name, but my title, yes.” Uhtred said “You are aware that our religious order does not have wordly titles based on family trees, as often we are

not related by birth. So when we do something that gives us a reputation, we take a title based on that.”

“I was told you are officially ‘Uhtred the Bold,’” said Degore. “What did you do?”

“The former head of the abbey was my grandfather by adoption, as you are my son by adoption, and he was called Hugo the Bold,” said Uhtred. “He left his family and came here after they chose the path of violence and he chose peace in some conflict or other many years ago. It was considered a very bold and brave thing for him to leave his family and position and titles and become a humble, poor priest.”

“We are not poor,” said Degore, adamantly.

Uhtred smiled. “We are very rich. We have all we need to live a good life. We have the spiritual fulfilment of our order to protect and nourish our souls. We have a family. We have the friendship of the dragons.”

Degore looked into Uhtred’s eyes and it was as if he could almost see into the past. “What do you value the most?”

“That would be my Freyja”—there was complete happiness and contentment on his face—“she is the best thing that ever happened to me. I have lived the best of lives with her.”

Degore gazed at his father’s face for a moment. It was rare for Uhtred to show much emotion. But he always softened when talking about Freyja. “But what about your name?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” said Uhtred, “I was an orphan like you—well, not quite the same. No dragon rides for me. I was not born in these lands. I do not know where I was born, but I was saved from a life of slavery, or even death. I grew up here as you are doing, and life was good. But one day a group of men came to attack the abbey. They thought we had gold. I knew there was a group of soldiers from Ballina Mallard doing training nearby, and so I snuck out through the invading army’s encampments, in the dead of night, as they encircled the abbey waiting for daybreak before they attacked, and asked for the soldiers’ help. They came to our aid and all the invaders were killed. But the commander had a daughter, and when I met her I knew my life would never be the same again. She was horrified that her father was leading men to destroy a simple religious order, and after her grief at his loss was over we were wed.”

“Where is Ballina Mallard?” asked Degore, “And where did the bad men come from?”

“They came in ships from the sea of Kieran. The city of Llyme was a trading port and the people of Llyme were more nomadic back then, so they had all gone

inland to be near the ripening crops, and so there was no one to stop the army landing.”

Degore had never been to Llyme, but it was the closest big city to them, and the abbey folk always went there to trade. It was just off the edge of the plateau, and on a very clear day Degore and Clancy could see out over the city, to the loch beyond. It was full of savage red haired men, but that was a good thing, as the people of that city kept the Abbey safely tucked away from the evils of the world, or so Uhtred had said.

“So Freyja did not want to go home to her people?” asked Degore.

“The king of Llyme seized the ships, and a search was made, but there was every indication that these men were pirates and mercenaries from many different places. And we could not even prove her father was who she thought he was. So I married her and gave her a new family.”

“I did wonder why she always paints black swans on things. Then I found out no swans anywhere are black,” Degore said. “Are the swans black where she is from?”

“Yes, and one of the ships was named the Black Swan. The king of Llyme bought the ships off her.”

“She must be rich!” Degore exclaimed.

Uhtred smiled. “Freyja does not want to wear silk and live in a mansion. She told me she was born to toil in the fields. The money is a part of the order, and is used for our expenses—like raising you and the other children.”

“You did not say who Ballina Mallard is,” Degore reminded him.

“They live to the west. Tucked away between mountain ranges. They are old allies of Llyme and they were training with some of their soldiers.” Uhtred stood up as Freyja entered.

The soup she bore smelt delicious and Degore grew suddenly ravenous.

Uhtred patted his head, “I am glad you are still with us.” He kissed Freyja on the cheek and left the room.

Degore slurped greedily at his soup.

“How did you end up getting gryphon poison on you?” Freyja asked as she took the empty bowl from him.

“I met him when the druid came and I met the wolf,” Degore said lying back in his bed, co-incidentally covered in the wolf’s hide, “and we saw each other again while I was exploring the woods, but I got too close.”

Freyja tucked him into bed and wild dreams of adventure, tinged with the sobering reality of death washed over him. Adventure was fun, but one could not just go out and be killed in service of it.

Land of Fools

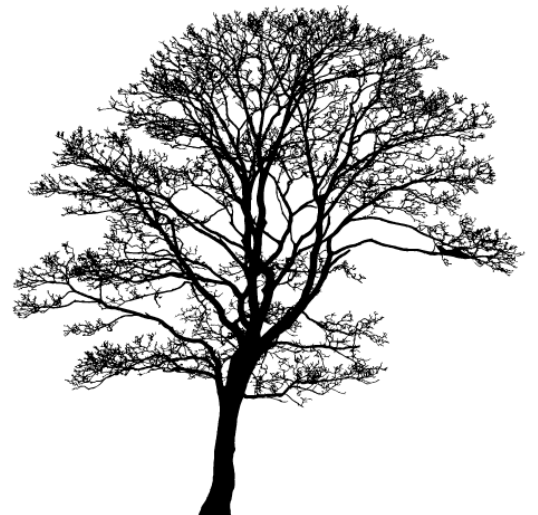
-Splendid Badger

A foolish heart,
With a foolish mind,
A dangerous concoction when combined.
A foolish tongue,
And a foolish touch,
Can make us all bow down to lust.

A foolish sense,
And a foolish style,
All is well when infantile.
A foolish boy,
And a foolish girl,
Knows not what for insults hurled.

A foolish mouth,
Whispers foolish things,
For foolish ears to listen.

And as the clock strikes midnight,
—The moth's wings burn.
As foolish eyes stare at the sand,
While foolish hands refuse to work.





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