

CORNCRAKE

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SHIELDING THE OAK OF
ENGLISH LITERATURE

TRIBUTE TO A BELOVED PET

-Bovril

Oh, faithful heart of gold,
Bore coat of chocolate silver;
Held beauty without pride, though
Sometimes lacking much dignity;
Shared boundless affection, matched
Only by a bottomless stomach.

No touch was softer nor purring
So sincere, when amber eyes looked up
At me, as you laid upon my breast;
How hardship made hasty retreat
When, head pressed close to cheek,
Your paws did knead my heart.

I didn't know how often I sought for
You, till no longer could you be found.
Your perfect trust, longsuffering patience,
Gentle love that none could resist;
How can such a small creature
Leave such a gaping hole?

The bed seems so much colder
Without you snoozing at the end.
Wilfully, I glance to chair and pillow,
Wishing for you, there, just asleep.
In dreams I still find you as such,
But you're lost again, when I awake.

You were my fervent friend
And my close companion.
Without you between my feet,
I scarcely think I can walk.
Though all my tears run dry,
My grief does not abate.

Endless hairs strewn every inch of
Clothing; where I once met flaw,
I will see a pleasing memoir.
Warm and woolly was your nature;
As still you were when we parted,
So you will remain forever.





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*Buried in the trench,
In deep darkness, he looked up
And saw Eärendel*

Smote
by William Riverdale

Editor's Note



Salutations good fellows! In this bumper issue, which is really just regular size, we have stuffed a whole lot of goodness. We start off with *The Knight of Wyrms Wood* by Alexander, who has written it in English. English is English without the influence of foreign words. A fun read with a few intriguing phrases.

An old but good tale by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is included *The Story of the Brazilian Cat*. Liquid Swan's third and last installment *Gotland. The Soul of a Cat* by Margaret Benson, and Shieldmaiden's *Druid Without a Home, The Desert Caravan*. Degore's story does not end here, but we bid him goodbye next issue to make room for a new continuing story next year by AR Duncan. LR Scott's regular contribution has been updated to LR Scott's Lore with a book so dusty it could have been taken from the mines of Moria.

This month we have interviewed Casting Stones about his art, and take a look at Lady Godiva with poetry from Lord Alfred Tennyson and art from John Collier and Jules Joseph Lefebvre. Enjoy the special feature of The Legend of Nessie, including the best vintage illustrations of her majesty.

Poetry this issue is *A Quiet Deep* by Miles Mcnaughton, a song from *She Stoops to Conquer* by Oliver Goldsmith, and a heartfelt poem from Bovril, *Tribute to a Beloved Pet*.

Call of the Shieldmaiden
Editor-in-Chief



The Knight in Wyrms Wood

Alexander



It was the Summertime, and his heart was drumming within his leaden breastplate. Hot breath steamed out of his helm into the cold Fallish air. As there was no breeze, his breath hung like dead bodies amongst the trees.

The path, which was clear when he began, was now becoming overgrown with brambles and ferns. He felt the trees close in, concealing him from the Sun's gaze. With ever step, the trees of Wyrms' Wood clawed at his feet with their roots. Drawing his sword, he thwacked at the bleed (*vegetation*), attempting to clear a way ahead. Hindered by the uneven ground, he eventually tripped, falling into the mud and moss. Lying on the floor, he recalled the wise monk's words, 'Wyrms are not the same as any other animal. They are part seen and part unseen. They are here and not-here. They warp sooth (*reality*), twist our feelings. Fear is their mother-tongue. Costning (*temptation*) is their weapon. They stand amongst the Watchers of old.'

Lifting his head, he spied a branch. Dropping his sword to the ground, he pulled himself up. Picking his weapon once again, he began to beset the undergrowth and clamber through the low hanging boughs, continuing his wayfare (*journey*) towards the hub of the wood.

The knight minded upon yesterday. He was passing near the village and heard the tale from an abiding monk. A tale about a wild wyrm who would leave the wood at night. He was a wolfshhead (*outlaw*) and a sheep-bane (*killer*). In the last few nights, a brat-like (*cloak*) fog of fear alighted over the village. Those who had entered the wood to dare the wyrm, had been lost without a smatch (*trace*). Everyone was now too frightened to enter the grimy place.

A sound of childish laughter pulled him away from his thoughts. It danced naughtily in the thick air. In a clean-hearted voice, he heard someone ask him to come here. Another, in a similar tone, disagreed with the former voice, saying 'No, no, come this way. You'll get lost going that way'. The knight turned his head from side to side to see who was speaking to him, but there was no one there.

The words of the wise monk came to mind, 'Wyrms are never alone. They are accompanied by elfen folk. Do not withsake (*argue*) them. They will wrench and shrench (*trick and tease*) your heart. They will lead you down wrong paths. So ignore them, and hone in on your end'. These words reesed (*rattled*) around his mind as the stefens (*voices*) softened.

The knight came to a felling (*clearing*), with a large leafless oak tree at its hub. Its arms stretching out widely. A fog began to fall, it was almost like a Springtime mist. The ground was thick with mud, a weast land (*barren*).

The monk's words came back to him, 'Wyrms are wreathen (*twisted*) wildings. Hewn from serpents, birds, lions and men. They forshapen (*transform*) between these. Beware, they are wordful (*talkative*) and slidder (*treacherous*). They breath out fire. A fire which does not burn the flesh, but the soul. If you fall to its costning (*temptation*), your heart will be lost'.

Highstrung, the knight dithered. Dwelling at the rim of the felling. Then it came.

'Scrawny man', the Wyrmsaid. The knight warily put forward. One foot after another. But still he could not see it.

The mist weltered (*tumbled*) over itself and in the clouds, two rich red eyes unfolded. An untellen (*indescribable*) mouth spoke, 'I see through your fireful (*sinful*) soul. It is as glass to me. I will unearth your deepest hoardcove (*where thoughts are stored*). i will bewray you (*uncover your secrets*), and bedevil you. Wretch.'

The shinely (*ghostly*) wyrm's tail thrust forward, twisting round the knight's left leg. He struck it with his sword, but it only cut through thin air, becoming stowed (*stuck*) in the ground. He could not leethe (*free*) it, so he let it go.

The knight began to weep as likenesses and metings (*images*) came to mind. Words bedovened (*submerged*) his heart with fright. He fell to his knees in thoughtache (*dread*). He dared not open his eyes.

The monk's words beshined upon him like shides (*splinters*) of light. The knight open his mouth to pray.

Alfather, who is in Heavenrich

Holy is your name

Come your kingdom

Be done your will

On Middleyard so in Heavenrich

Give your evermore bread

Remiss our sins, as we remiss those who sin against us

And lead us not into costning

Leese us from evil

Amen

He made the sign of the Rood (*cross*).

Silence fell. Birds sang like it was the Dawn chorus. The knight slowly opened his eyes. The mists had rolled away. The Sun poured light throughout the felling. The oak tree was covered in bright leaves. And the knight sat quietly, crying.

English is a form of English which prefers native words over foreign ones. It relies heavily on those with a Old English and Germanic route, ignoring Latin, French, etc.

It was developed in 1966 by Paul Jennings

The Soul of a Cat

Margaret Benson



PERSIS was a dainty lady, pure Persian, blue and white, silky haired. When this story opens, she was in middle age, the crisis of her life had passed. She had had kittens, she had seen them grow up, and as they grew, she had grown to hate them, with a hatred founded on jealousy and love. She was a cat of extreme sensibility, of passionate temper, of a character attractive and lovable from its very intensity. We had been forced to face Persis' difficulty with her and make our choice — should we let her go about with a sullen face to the world, green eyes glooming wretchedly upon it, an intensity of wretchedness, jealousy and hate consuming her little cat's heart, or would we follow Persis' wishes about the kittens, and give them up, when they grew to be a burden on her mind and heart? For while they were young, she loved them much. She chose favourites among them, usually the one most like herself, lavished a wealth of care, with anxiety in a small, troubled, motherly face, on their manners, their appearance, their amusements.

I remember one pathetic scene on a rainy evening in late summer, when the kittens of the time were playing about -the room, and Persi's evening in late summer, when the kittens of the evening in late summer, when the kittens of her mouth. We thought it was a dead bird, and though regretting the fact, did not hinder her when she deposited it before her favourite kitten, a shy, grey creature, and retired to the lap of a forbearing friend to make her toilet. But while she was thus engaged, we saw that the thing she had brought in was a shivering little bird, a belated fledgling, alive and unhurt. The grey kitten had not touched it, but with paws tucked under him was regarding it with a cold, steady gaze. He was quite unmoved when we took it away and restored it to a profitless liberty, with a few scathing remarks on the cruelty of cats. It is so nice and affectionate of a father to initiate his little son into the pleasures of sport and show him how to play a fish, but quite another thing for a brutal cat to show her kitten how to play with a live bird — a cat, indeed, from whom we should have expected a sympathetic imagination!

When Persis had washed and combed her- self she came down to see how her son was enjoying his first attempt at sport; but no affectionate father sympathising with his boy for losing his fish would have been half as much distressed as Persis to find her kitten robbed of his game. She ran round the room crying as she went, searched for the bird under chairs and tables, sprang on the knees of her friends to seek it, and wailed for the loss of her present to her son. Again, there was no danger that she would not face in defence of her kittens. My brother had a wire-haired terrier of horrid reputation as a cat-killer. The name of the terrier, for an occult and complicated reason, was Two- Timothy - Three - Ten, but it was generally abbreviated. Tim, large and formidable even to those who had not heard of his

exploits, slipped into the room once where a placid domestic scene was in process. Without a moment's pause the cat was on him like a wild beast. I caught Timothy and held him up, but the cat had dug her claws so firmly into his foot that she, too, was lifted off the ground.

But as the kittens grew older maternal tenderness and delights faded, maternal cares ceased, and a dull, jealous misery settled down over Persis. She had been left down in the country with a kitten once — alas! a tabby kitten — which was growing old enough to leave her when I came over for the day and went to see her. The kitten, unconscious of his unfortunate appearance, was as happy as most kittens; he walked round the cat and did not mind an occasional growl or cuff. But she, not responding at all to my caresses, sat staring out before her with such black, im- movable despair on her face that I shall not easily forget it.

Thus, the cat's life was a series of violent changes of mood. While her kittens were young, she was blissful with them, trustful to all human beings; as they grew older, she became sullen, suspicious, and filled with jealous gloom. When they were gone, she again became affectionate and gentle; she decked herself with faded graces, was busied with secret errands, and intent on aesthetic pleasure — the smell of fresh air, each particular scent of ivy leaves round the trunk of the cedar.

She caught influenza once in an interval of peace and came near dying, and, they said, received attention seriously and gratefully like a sick person; I was not surprised to hear that her friend sacrificed a pet bantam to tempt the returning appetite of the invalid.

While we were homeless for a year or more, Persis was lodged at the old home farm, and lorded it over the animals. Two cats were there: one the revered and hideous Tom, with whose white hair Persis had bestrewn a house at once for the farm and wisely refused to return. Now he was a prop of the stab- Lishman. He killed the rats, he sat serene in the sun, was able to ignore the village dogs and cuff the boisterous collie puppies of the farm. So, he met Persis on secure and dignified terms. It was well, for he had formed a tender attachment to her daughter; they drank milk out of a saucer together, looking like the Princess and the Ploughboy; and when the Plough- boy went out hunting (for he must vary his diet a little — unmitigated rat is monotonous) he invariably brought back the hind legs of the rabbit for the Princess.

Strange to say, the Princess was the only one of the grown - up kittens with whom Persis entered into terms of friendship; so, while the Princess ate the rabbits of the Ploughboy, Persis ate the sparrows provided by the Princess, and they were all at peace. She rejoined us again when we settled in a country town. The house

was backed by a walled garden; exits and entrances were easier than in the larger houses where Persis had lived with us before. She loved to get up by the wistaria, climb across the conservatory roof, and get in and out through bedroom windows. She found a black grandson already established, it is true, but in a strictly subordinate position. Justice was cast to the — cats, and they fought it out between them; and when Persis threw herself into the fray there could be but one end. Ra liked comfort, but his sensibilities were undeveloped. If he could get the food he desired (and he invariably entered the room with fish or pheasant) he did not care how or where it was given him; a plate of fish-bones in the conservatory would be more grateful than a stalled ox under his grandmother's eye. But to the old cat the attention was everything; she took the food not so much because she cared for it as because it was offered individually to her. If Ra managed to establish himself on the arm of a chair he would remind the owner of his desires by the tap of a black paw, or by gently intercepting a fork. But Persis' sole desire was that she might be desired; the invitation was the great point, not the feast; she lay purring with soft, intelligent eyes, which grew hard and angry if the form of her dusky grandson appeared in the open door. She would get down from the lap on which she was lying, strike at the hand which tried to detain her, and — but by this time Ra had been removed and peace restored. Her most blissful moments were when she could find her mistress in bed, and curl up beside her, pouring out a volume of soft sound; or when she was shown to company. Then she walked with dainty steps and waving tail as in the old days, with something of the same grace, though not with the old beauty, trampling a visitor's dress with rhythmically moving paws, and the graciously modest air of one who confers an honour. It came near to pathos to see her play the great lady and the petted kitten before the vet. who came to prescribe for her. Now she was all gratitude for attentions, and whereas when she was young, she would not come to a call out of doors, but coquetted with us just beyond our reach, now she would come running in from the garden when I called her, loved to be taken up and lie with chin and paws resting on my shoulder, looking down from it like a child. The old nurse carried her on one arm like a baby, and the cat stretched out paws on each side round her waist. She had more confidence in human dealings, too. I had to punish her once, to her great surprise. She ran a few steps and waited for me with such confidence that it was difficult to follow up the punishment, more especially as Taffy watched exultant, and came up smiling to insist on the fact that he was a good dog.

Taffy's relationship with the cat was any- thing but cordial. It was her fault, for he had well learnt the household maxim "cats first and pleasure afterwards." But Persis can hardly be said to have treated him like a

lady; she did not actually show fight, but vented ill-temper by pushing rudely in front of him with a disagreeable remark as she passed.

All this time Persis was growing old and small. Her coat was thick, but shorter than of old; her tail waved far less wealth of hair. She jumped into the fountain one day by mistake, and as she stood still with clinging hair under the double shock of the water and the laughter one noticed what a little shrunken cat she had become; only her face was young and vivid with conflicting passions. Then the last change of her life came. We went to a place which was a paradise for cats, but a paradise ringed with death; a rambling Elizabethan house, where mice ran and rattled behind the panels; a garden with bushes to creep behind and strange country creatures stirring in the grass; barns which were a pre- serve for rats and mice; and finally, the three most important elements of happiness, entire freedom, no smuts, and no grandson.

Persis was overwhelmed with pressure of affairs; one saw her crouching near the farm in early morning; met her later on the stairs carrying home game, and was greeted only by a quick look as of one intent on business. The one drawback to this place was that it was surrounded by woods, carefully preserved.

By this time, I had come to two clear re- solves; the first, that I would never again develop the sensibilities of an animal beyond certain limits; for one creates claims that one has no power to satisfy. The feelings of a sensitive animal are beyond our control, and beyond its own also.

And the second was this; since it is im- possible to let an animal when it is old and I'll live among human beings as it may when it is healthy; since it can be no possibility understand why sympathy is denied it and demon- stations of affection checked; I would myself, as soon as such signs of broken intercourse occurred, give Persis the lethal water. I had been haunted by the pathos in the face of a dog who had been and indeed still was a family pet; but he was deaf. Even when he was fondled an indescribable depression hung about him; he had fallen into silence; he knew not how or why. Dogs respond to nothing more quickly than the tones of the human voice, but now no voice came through the stillness. Despairingly he put himself, as they told us, in the way of those who passed, lay on steps or in the doorways. Since we cannot find means to alleviate such sufferings, we can at least end them.

But I never needed to put this determine- tion into effect. The last time I saw Persis was once when she came to greet me at the door, and lifting her I noticed how light she was; and again, I saw her coming downstairs on some business of her own, with an air at once furtive and arrogant, quaint in so small a creature.

Then Persis vanished. She had been absent before for days at a time; had once disappeared for three weeks and returned thin and exhausted. So, at first, we did not trouble; then we called her in the garden, in the fields and the coverts, wrote to find out if she had returned to some old home, and offered a reward for her finding; but all was fruitless. I do not know now whether she had gone away as some creatures do, to die alone, for the signs of age were on her; or if she had met a speedy death at the hands of a gamekeeper while she was following up some wild romance of the woods.

So vanished secretly from life that strange, troubled

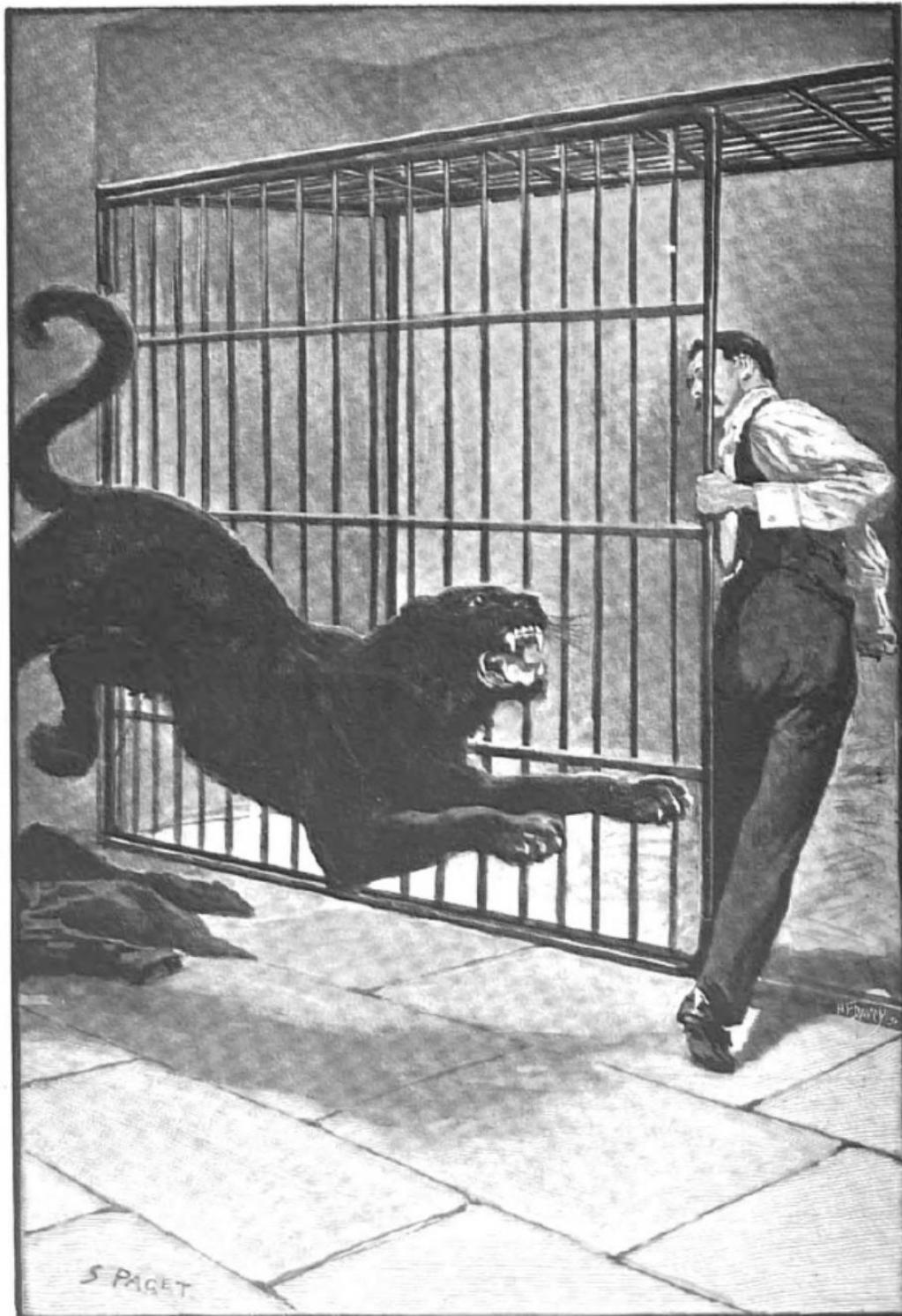
little soul of a cat — a troubled soul, for it was not the animal lovers and hates which were too much for her — these she had ample spirit and courage to endure, but she knew a jealous love for beings beyond her dim power of comprehension, a passionate desire for praise and admiration from creatures whom she did not understand, and these waked a strange conflict and turmoil in the vivid and limited nature, troubling her relations with her kind, filling her now with black despairs, and painful passions, and now with serene, half understood content.

Who shall say whether a creature like this can ever utterly perish? How shall we who know so little of their nature profess to know so much of their future?



The Story of the Brazilian Cat

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



It is hard luck on a young fellow to have expensive tastes, great expectations, aristocratic connections, but no actual money in his pocket, and no profession by which he may earn any. The fact was that my father, a good, sanguine, easy-going man, had such confidence in the wealth and benevolence of his bachelor elder brother, Lord Southerton, that he took it for granted that I, his only son, would never be called upon to earn a living for myself. He imagined that if there were not a vacancy for me on the great Southerton Estates, at least there would be found some post in that diplomatic service which still remains the special preserve of our privileged classes. He died too early to realize how false his calculations had been. Neither my uncle nor the State took the slightest notice of me, or showed any interest in my career. An occasional brace of pheasants, or basket of hares, was all that ever reached me to remind me that I was heir to Otwell House and one of the richest estates in the country. In the meantime, I found myself a bachelor and man about town, living in a suite of apartments in Grosvenor Mansions, with no occupation save that of pigeon-shooting and polo-playing at Hurlingham. Month by month I realized that it was more and more difficult to get the brokers to renew my bills, or to cash any further post-obits upon an untailed property. Ruin lay right across my path, and every day I saw it clearer, nearer, and more absolutely unavoidable.

What made me feel my own poverty the more was that, apart from the great wealth of Lord Southerton, all my other relations were fairly well-to-do. The nearest of these was Everard King, my father's nephew and my own first cousin, who had spent an adventurous life in Brazil, and had now returned to this country to settle down on his fortune. We never knew how he made his money, but he appeared to have plenty of it, for he bought the estate of Greylands, near Clipton-on-the-Marsh, in Suffolk. For the first year of his residence in England he took no more notice of me than my miserly uncle; but at last one summer morning, to my very great relief and joy, I received a letter asking me to come down that very day and spend a short visit at Greylands Court. I was expecting a rather long visit to Bankruptcy Court at the time, and this interruption seemed almost providential. If I could only get on terms with this unknown relative of mine, I might pull through yet. For the family credit he could not let me go entirely to the wall. I ordered my valet to pack my valise, and I set off the same evening for Clipton-on-the-Marsh.

After changing at Ipswich, a little local train deposited me at a small, deserted station lying amidst a rolling grassy country, with a sluggish and winding river curving in and out amidst the valleys, between high, silted banks, which showed that we were within

reach of the tide. No carriage was awaiting me (I found afterwards that my telegram had been delayed), so I hired a dog-cart at the local inn. The driver, an excellent fellow, was full of my relative's praises, and I learned from him that Mr. Everard King was already a name to conjure with in that part of the country. He had entertained the school-children, he had thrown his grounds open to visitors, he had subscribed to charities — in short, his benevolence had been so universal that my driver could only account for it on the supposition that he had Parliamentary ambitions.

My attention was drawn away from my driver's panegyric by the appearance of a very beautiful bird which settled on a telegraph-post beside the road. At first I thought that it was a jay, but it was larger, with a brighter plumage. The driver accounted for its presence at once by saying that it belonged to the very man whom we were about to visit. It seems that the acclimatization of foreign creatures was one of his hobbies, and that he had brought with him from Brazil a number of birds and beasts which he was endeavouring to rear in England. When once we had passed the gates of Greylands Park we had ample evidence of this taste of his. Some small spotted deer, a curious wild pig known, I believe, as a peccary, a gorgeously feathered oriole, some sort of armadillo, and a singular lumbering intoed beast like a very fat badger, were among the creatures which I observed as we drove along the winding avenue.

Mr. Everard King, my unknown cousin, was standing in person upon the steps of his house, for he had seen us in the distance, and guessed that it was I. His appearance was very homely and benevolent, short and stout, forty-five years old perhaps, with a round, good-humoured face, burned brown with the tropical sun, and shot with a thousand wrinkles. He wore white linen clothes, in true planter style, with a cigar between his lips, and a large Panama hat upon the back of his head. It was such a figure as one associates with a verandahed bungalow, and it looked curiously out of place in front of this broad, stone English mansion, with its solid wings and its Palladio pillars before the doorway.

"My dear!" he cried, glancing over his shoulder; "my dear, here is our guest! Welcome, welcome to Greylands! I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Cousin Marshall, and I take it as a great compliment that you should honour this sleepy little country place with your presence."

Nothing could be more hearty than his manner, and he set me at my ease in an instant. But it needed all his cordiality to atone for the frigidity and even rudeness of his wife, a tall, haggard woman, who came forward at his summons. She was, I believe, of Brazilian extraction, though she spoke excellent

English, and I excused her manners on the score of her ignorance of our customs. She did not attempt to conceal, however, either then or afterwards, that I was no very welcome visitor at Greylands Court. Her actual words were, as a rule, courteous, but she was the possessor of a pair of particularly expressive dark eyes, and I read in them very clearly from the first that she heartily wished me back in London once more.

However, my debts were too pressing and my designs upon my wealthy relative were too vital for me to allow them to be upset by the ill-temper of his wife, so I disregarded her coldness and reciprocated the extreme cordiality of his welcome. No pains had been spared by him to make me comfortable. My room was a charming one. He implored me to tell him anything which could add to my happiness. It was on the tip of my tongue to inform him that a blank cheque would materially help towards that end, but I felt that it might be premature in the present state of our acquaintance. The dinner was excellent, and as we sat together afterwards over his Havanas and coffee, which latter he told me was specially prepared upon his own plantation, it seemed to me that all my driver's eulogies were justified, and that I had never met a more large-hearted and hospitable man.

But, in spite of his cheery good nature, he was a man with a strong will and a fiery temper of his own. Of this I had an example upon the following morning. The curious aversion which Mrs. Everard King had conceived towards me was so strong, that her manner at breakfast was almost offensive. But her meaning became unmistakable when her husband had quitted the room.

"The best train in the day is at twelve fifteen," said she.

"But I was not thinking of going to-day," I answered, frankly — perhaps even defiantly, for I was determined not to be driven out by this woman.

"Oh, if it rests with you—" said she, and stopped, with a most insolent expression in her eyes.

"I am sure," I answered "that Mr. Everard King would tell me if I were outstaying my welcome."

"What's this? What's this?" said a voice, and there he was in the room. He had overheard my last words, and a glance at our faces had told him the rest. In an instant his chubby, cheery face set into an expression of absolute ferocity.

"Might I trouble you to walk outside, Marshall," said he. (I may mention that my own name is Marshall King.)

He closed the door behind me, and then, for an instant, I heard him talking in a low voice of concentrated passion to his wife. This gross breach of hospitality had evidently hit upon his tenderest point. I am no eavesdropper, so I walked out on to the lawn.

Presently I heard a hurried step behind me, and there was the lady, her face pale with excitement, and her eyes red with tears.

"My husband has asked me to apologize to you, Mr. Marshall King," said she, standing with downcast eyes before me.

"Please do not say another word, Mrs. King."

Her dark eyes suddenly blazed out at me.

"You fool!" she hissed, with frantic vehemence, and turning on her heel swept back to the house.

The insult was so outrageous, so insufferable, that I could only stand staring after her in bewilderment. I was still there when my host joined me. He was his cheery, chubby self once more.

"I hope that my wife has apologized for her foolish remarks," said he.

"Oh, yes—yes, certainly!"

He put his hand through my arm and walled with me up and down the lawn.

"You must not take it seriously," said he. "It would grieve me inexpressibly if you curtailed your visit by one hour. The fact is — there is no reason why there should be any concealment between relatives — that my poor dear wife is incredibly jealous. She hates that any one — male or female — should for an instant come between us. Her ideal is a desert island and an eternal tete-a-tete. That gives you the clue to her actions, which are, I confess, upon this particular point, not very far removed from mania. Tell me that you will think no more of it."

"No, no; certainly not."

"Then light this cigar and come round with me and see my little menagerie."

The whole afternoon was occupied by this inspection, which included all the birds, beasts, and even reptiles which he had imported. Some were free, some in cages, a few actually in the house. He spoke with enthusiasm of his successes and his failures, his births and his deaths, and he would cry out in his delight, like a schoolboy, when, as we walked, some gaudy bird would flutter up from the grass, or some curious beast slink into the cover. Finally he led me down a corridor which extended from one wing of the house. At the end of this there was a heavy door with a sliding shutter in it, and beside it there projected from the wall an iron handle attached to a wheel and a drum. A line of stout bars extended across the passage. "I am about to show you the jewel of my collection," said he. "There is only one other specimen in Europe, now that the Rotterdam cub is dead. It is a Brazilian cat."

"But how does that differ from any other cat?"

"You will soon see that," said he, laughing. "Will you kindly draw that shutter and look through?"

I did so, and found that I was gazing into a large, empty room, with stone flags, and small, barred windows upon the farther wall.

In the centre of this room, lying in the middle of a golden patch of sunlight, there was stretched a huge creature, as large as a tiger, but as black and sleek as ebony. It was simply a very enormous and very well-kept black cat, and it cuddled up and basked in that yellow pool of light exactly as a cat would do. It was so graceful, so sinewy, and so gently and smoothly diabolical, that I could not take my eyes from the opening.

"Isn't he splendid?" said my host, enthusiastically,

"Glorious! I never saw such a noble creature."

"Some people call it a black puma, but really it is not a puma at all. That fellow is nearly eleven feet from tail to tip. Four years ago he was a little ball of black fluff, with two yellow eyes staring out of it. He was sold me as a new-born cub up in the wild country at the head-waters of the Rio Negro. They speared his mother to death after she had killed a dozen of them."

"They are ferocious, then?"

"The most absolutely treacherous and blood-thirsty creatures upon earth. You talk about a Brazilian cat to an up-country Indian, and see him get the jumps. They prefer humans to game. This fellow has never tasted living blood yet, but when he does he will be a terror. At present he won't stand any one but me in his den. Even Baldwin, the groom, dare not go near him. As to me, I am his mother and father in one."

As he spoke he suddenly, to my astonishment, opened the door and slipped in, closing it instantly behind him. At the sound of his voice the huge, lithe creature rose, yawned, and rubbed its round, black head affectionately against his side, while he patted and fondled it.

"Now, Tommy, into your cage!" said he.

The monstrous cat walked over to one side of the room and coiled itself up under a grating. Everard King came out, and taking the iron handle which I have mentioned, he began to turn it. As he did so the line of bars in the corridor began to pass through a slot in the wall and closed up the front of this grating, so as to make an effective cage. When it was in position he opened the door once more and invited me into the room, which was heavy with the pungent, musty smell peculiar to the great carnivora.

"That's how we work it," said he. "We give him the run of the room for exercise, and then at night we put him in his cage. You can let him out by turning the handle from the passage, or you can, as you have seen, coop him up in the same way. No, no, you should not do that!"

I had put my hand between the bars to pat the glossy, heaving flank. He pulled it back, with a serious face.

"I assure you that he is not safe. Don't imagine that because I can take liberties with him any one else can. He is very exclusive in his friends — aren't you, Tommy? Ah, he hears his lunch coming to him! Don't you, boy?"

A step sounded in the stone-flagged passage, and the creature had sprung to his feet, and was pacing up and down the narrow cage, his yellow eyes gleaming, and his scarlet tongue rippling and quivering over the white line of his jagged teeth. A groom entered with a coarse joint upon a tray, and thrust it through the bars to him. He pounced lightly upon it, carried it off to the corner, and there, holding it between his paws, tore and wrenched at it, raising his bloody muzzle every now and then to look at us. It was a malignant and yet fascinating sight.

"You can't wonder that I am fond of him, can you?" said my host, as we left the room, "especially when you consider that I have had the rearing of him. It was no joke bringing him over from the centre of South America; but here he is safe and sound — and, as I have said, far the most perfect specimen in Europe. The people at the Zoo are dying to have him, but I really can't part with him. Now, I think that I have inflicted my hobby upon you long enough, so we cannot do better than follow Tommy's example, and go to our lunch."

My South American relative was so engrossed by his grounds and their curious occupants, that I hardly gave him credit at first for having any interests outside them. That he had some, and pressing ones, was soon borne in upon me by the number of telegrams which he received. They arrived at all hours, and were always opened by him with the utmost eagerness and anxiety upon his face. Sometimes I imagined that it must be the turf, and sometimes the Stock Exchange, but certainly he had some very urgent business going forwards which was not transacted upon the Downs of Suffolk. During the six days of my visit he had never fewer than three or four telegrams a day, and sometimes as many as seven or eight.

I had occupied these six days so well, that by the end of them I had succeeded in getting upon the most cordial terms with my cousin. Every night we had sat up late in the billiard-room, he telling me the most extraordinary stories of his adventures in America — stories so desperate and reckless, that I could hardly associate them with the brown little, chubby man before me. In return, I ventured upon some of my own reminiscences of London life, which interested him so much, that he vowed he would come up to Grosvenor Mansions and stay with me. He was anxious to see the

faster side of city life, and certainly, though I say it, he could not have chosen a more competent guide. It was not until the last day of my visit that I ventured to approach that which was on my mind. I told him frankly about my pecuniary difficulties and my impending ruin, and I asked his advice — though I hoped for something more solid. He listened attentively, puffing hard at his cigar.

"But surely," said he, "you are the heir of our relative, Lord Southerton?"

"I have every reason to believe so, but he would never make me any allowance."

"No, no, I have heard of his miserly ways. My poor Marshall, your position has been a very hard one. By the way, have you heard any news of Lord Southerton's health lately?"

"He has always been in a critical condition ever since my childhood."

"Exactly — a creaking hinge, if ever there was one. Your inheritance may be a long way off. Dear me, how awkwardly situated you are!"

"I had some hopes, sir, that you, knowing all the facts, might be inclined to advance—"

"Don't say another word, my dear boy," he cried, with the utmost cordiality; "we shall talk it over to-night, and I give you my word that whatever is in my power shall be done."

I was not sorry that my visit was drawing to a close, for it is unpleasant to feel that there is one person in the house who eagerly desires your departure. Mrs. King's sallow face and forbidding eyes had become more and more hateful to me. She was no longer actively rude — her fear of her husband prevented her — but she pushed her insane jealousy to the extent of ignoring me, never addressing me, and in every way making my stay at Greylands as uncomfortable as she could. So offensive was her manner during that last day, that I should certainly have left had it not been for that interview with my host in the evening which would, I hoped, retrieve my broken fortunes.

It was very late when it occurred, for my relative, who had been receiving even more telegrams than usual during the day, went off to his study after dinner, and only emerged when the household had retired to bed. I heard him go round locking the doors, as his custom was of a night, and finally he joined me in the billiard-room. His stout figure was wrapped in a dressing-gown, and he wore a pair of red Turkish slippers without any heels. Settling down into an arm-chair, he brewed himself a glass of grog, in which I could not help noticing that the whisky considerably predominated over the water.

"My word!" said he, "what a night!"

It was, indeed. The wind was howling and screaming round the house, and the latticed windows

I rattled and shook as if they were coming in. The glow of the yellow lamps and the flavour of our cigars seemed the brighter and more fragrant for the contrast.

"Now, my boy," said my host, "we have the house and the night to ourselves. Let me have an idea of how your affairs stand, and I will see what can be done to set them in order. I wish to hear every detail."

Thus encouraged, I entered into a long exposition, in which all my tradesmen and creditors, from my landlord to my valet, figured in turn. I had notes in my pocket-book, and I marshalled my facts, and gave, I flatter myself, a very business-like statement of my own unbusiness-like ways and lamentable position. I was depressed, however, to notice that my companion's eyes were vacant and his attention elsewhere. When he did occasionally throw out a remark, it was so entirely perfunctory and pointless, that I was sure he had not in the least followed my remarks. Every now and then he roused himself and put on some show of interest, asking me to repeat or to explain more fully, but it was always to sink once more into the same brown study. At last he rose and threw the end of his cigar into the grate.

"I'll tell you what, my boy," said he. "I never had a head for figures, so you will excuse me. You must jot it all down upon paper, and let me have a note of the amount. I'll understand it when I see it in black and white."

The proposal was encouraging. I promised to do so.

"And now it's time we were in bed. By Jove, there's one o'clock striking in the hall."

The tinging of the chiming clock broke through the deep roar of the gale. The wind was sweeping past with the rush of a great river.

"I must see my cat before I go to bed," said my host. "A high wind excites him. Will you come?"

"Certainly," said I.

"Then tread softly and don't speak, for every one is asleep."

We passed quietly down the lamp-lit Persian-rugged hall, and through the door at the farther end. All was dark in the stone corridor, but a stable lantern hung on a hook, and my host took it down and lit it. There was no grating visible in the passage, so I knew that the beast was in its cage.

"Come in!" said my relative, and opened the door.

A deep growling as we entered showed that the storm had really excited the creature. In the flickering light of the lantern, we saw it, a huge black mass, coiled in the corner of its den and throwing a squat, uncouth shadow upon the whitewashed wall. Its tail switched angrily among the straw.

"Poor Tommy is not in the best of tempers," said Everard King, holding up the lantern and looking in at him. "What a black devil he looks, doesn't he? I must give him a little supper to put him in a better humour. Would you mind holding the lantern for a moment?"

I took it from his hand and he stepped to the door.

"His larder is just outside here," said he. "You will excuse me for an instant, won't you?" He passed out, and the door shut with a sharp metallic click behind him.

That hard crisp sound made my heart stand still. A sudden wave of terror passed over me. A vague perception of some monstrous treachery turned me cold. I sprang to the door, but there was no handle upon the inner side.

"Here!" I cried. "Let me out!"

"All right! Don't make a row!" said my host from the passage. "You've got the light all right."

"Yes, but I don't care about being locked in alone like this."

"Don't you?" I heard his hearty, chuckling laugh. "You won't be alone long."

"Let me out, sir!" I repeated angrily. "I tell you I don't allow practical jokes of this sort."

"Practical is the word," said he, with another hateful chuckle. And then suddenly I heard, amidst the roar of the storm, the creak and whine of the winch-handle turning, and the rattle of the grating as it passed through the slot. Great God, he was letting loose the Brazilian cat!

In the light of the lantern I saw the bars sliding slowly before me. Already there was an opening a foot wide at the farther end. With a scream I seized the last bar with my hands and pulled with the strength of a madman. I was a madman with rage and horror. For a minute or more I held the thing motionless. I knew that he was straining with all his force upon the handle, and that the leverage was sure to overcome me. I gave inch by inch, my feet sliding along the stones, and all the time I begged and prayed this inhuman monster to save me from this horrible death. I conjured him by his kinship. I reminded him that I was his guest; I begged to know what harm I had ever done him. His only answers were the tugs and jerks upon the handle, each of which, in spite of all my struggles, pulled another bar through the opening. Clinging and clutching, I was dragged across the whole front of the cage, until at last, with aching wrists and lacerated fingers, I gave up the hopeless struggle. The grating clanged back as I released it, and an instant later I heard the shuffle of the Turkish slippers in the passage, and the slam of the distant door. Then everything was silent.

The creature had never moved during this time. He lay still in the corner, and his tail had ceased switching. This apparition of a man adhering to his bars and dragged screaming across him had apparently filled him with amazement. I saw his great eyes staring steadily at me. I had dropped the lantern when I seized the bars, but it still burned upon the floor, and I made a movement to grasp it, with some idea that its light might protect me. But the instant I moved, the beast gave a deep and menacing growl. I stopped and stood still, quivering with fear in every limb. The cat (if one may call so fearful a creature by so homely a name) was not more than ten feet from me. The eyes glimmered like two discs of phosphorus in the darkness. They appalled and yet fascinated me. I could not take my own eyes from them. Nature plays strange tricks with us at such moments of intensity, and those glimmering lights waxed and waned with a steady rise and fall. Sometimes they seemed to be tiny points of extreme brilliancy — little electric sparks in the black obscurity — then they would widen and widen until all that corner of the room was filled with their shifting and sinister light. And then suddenly they went out altogether.

The beast had closed its eyes. I do not know whether there may be any truth in the old idea of the dominance of the human gaze, or whether the huge cat was simply drowsy, but the fact remains that, far from showing any symptom of attacking me, it simply rested its sleek, black head upon its huge forepaws and seemed to sleep. I stood, fearing to move lest I should rouse it into malignant life once more. But at least I was able to think clearly now that the baleful eyes were off me. Here I was shut up for the night with the ferocious beast. My own instincts, to say nothing of the words of the plausible villain who laid this trap for me, warned me that the animal was as savage as its master. How could I stave it off until morning? The door was hopeless, and so were the narrow, barred windows. There was no shelter anywhere in the bare, stone-flagged room. To cry for assistance was absurd. I knew that this den was an outhouse, and that the corridor which connected it with the house was at least a hundred feet long. Besides, with that gale thundering outside, my cries were not likely to be heard. I had only my own courage and my own wits to trust to.

And then, with a fresh wave of horror, my eyes fell upon the lantern. The candle had burned low, and was already beginning to gutter. In ten minutes it would be out. I had only ten minutes then in which to do something, for I felt that if I were once left in the dark with that fearful beast I should be incapable of action. The very thought of it paralyzed me. I cast my despairing eyes round this chamber of death, and they rested upon one spot which seemed to promise I will

not say safety, but less immediate and imminent danger than the open floor.

I have said that the cage had a top as well as a front, and this top was left standing when the front was wound through the slot in the wall. It consisted of bars at a few inches' interval, with stout wire netting between, and it rested upon a strong stanchion at each end. It stood now as a great barred canopy over the crouching figure in the corner. The space between this iron shelf and the roof may have been from two to three feet. If I could only get up there, squeezed in between bars and ceiling, I should have only one vulnerable side. I should be safe from below, from behind, and from each side. Only on the open face of it could I be attacked. There, it is true, I had no protection whatever; but, at least, I should be out of the brute's path when he began to pace about his den. He would have to come out of his way to reach me. It was now or never, for if once the light were out it would be impossible. With a gulp in my throat I sprang up, seized the iron edge of the top, and swung myself panting on to it. I writhed in face downwards, and found myself looking straight into the terrible eyes and yawning jaws of the cat. Its fetid breath came up into my face like the steam from some foul pot.

It appeared, however, to be rather curious than angry. With a sleek ripple of its long, black back it rose, stretched itself, and then rearing itself on its hind legs, with one fore paw against the wall, it raised the other, and drew its claws across the wire meshes beneath me. One sharp, white hook tore through my trousers — for I may mention that I was still in evening dress — and dug a furrow in my knee. It was not meant as an attack, but rather as an experiment, for upon my giving a sharp cry of pain he dropped down again, and springing lightly into the room, he began walking swiftly round it, looking up every now and again in my direction. For my part I shuffled backwards until I lay with my back against the wall, screwing myself into the smallest space possible. The farther I got the more difficult it was for him to attack me.

He seemed more excited now that he had begun to move about, and he ran swiftly and noiselessly round and round the den, passing continually underneath the iron couch upon which I lay. It was wonderful to see so great a bulk passing like a shadow, with hardly the softest thudding of velvety pads. The candle was burning low — so low that I could hardly see the creature. And then, with a last flare and splutter it went out altogether. I was alone with the cat in the dark!

It helps one to face a danger when one knows that one has done all that possibly can be done. There is nothing for it then but to quietly await the result. In this case, there was no chance of safety anywhere

except the precise spot where I was. I stretched myself out, therefore, and lay silently, almost breathlessly, hoping that the beast might forget my presence if I did nothing to remind him. I reckoned that it must already be two o'clock. At four it would be full dawn. I had not more than two hours to wait for daylight.

Outside, the storm was still raging, and the rain lashed continually against the little windows. Inside, the poisonous and fetid air was overpowering. I could neither hear nor see the cat. I tried to think about other things — but only one had power enough to draw my mind from my terrible position. That was the contemplation of my cousin's villainy, his unparalleled hypocrisy, his malignant hatred of me. Beneath that cheerful face there lurked the spirit of a mediaeval assassin. And as I thought of it I saw more clearly how cunningly the thing had been arranged. He had apparently gone to bed with the others. No doubt he had his witnesses to prove it. Then, unknown to them, he had slipped down, had lured me into this den and abandoned me. His story would be so simple. He had left me to finish my cigar in the billiard-room. I had gone down on my own account to have a last look at the cat. I had entered the room without observing that the cage was opened, and I had been caught. How could such a crime be brought home to him? Suspicion, perhaps — but proof, never!

How slowly those dreadful two hours went by! Once I heard a low, rasping sound, which I took to be the creature licking its own fur. Several times those greenish eyes gleamed at me through the darkness, but never in a fixed stare, and my hopes grew stronger that my presence had been forgotten or ignored. At last the least faint glimmer of light came through the windows — I first dimly saw them as two grey squares upon the black wall, then grey turned to white, and I could see my terrible companion once more. And he, alas, could see me!

It was evident to me at once that he was in a much more dangerous and aggressive mood than when I had seen him last. The cold of the morning had irritated him, and he was hungry as well. With a continual growl he paced swiftly up and down the side of the room which was farthest from my refuge, his whiskers bristling angrily, and his tail switching and lashing. As he turned at the corners his savage eyes always looked upwards at me with a dreadful menace. I knew then that he meant to kill me. Yet I found myself even at that moment admiring the sinuous grace of the devilish thing, its long, undulating, rippling movements, the gloss of its beautiful flanks, the vivid, palpitating scarlet of the glistening tongue which hung from the jet-black muzzle. And all the time that deep, threatening growl was rising and rising in an unbroken crescendo. I knew that the crisis was at hand.

It was a miserable hour to meet such a death — so cold, so comfortless, shivering in my light dress clothes upon this gridiron of torment upon which I was stretched. I tried to brace myself to it, to raise my soul above it, and at the same time, with the lucidity which comes to a perfectly desperate man, I cast round for some possible means of escape. One thing was clear to me. If that front of the cage was only back in its position once more, I could find a sure refuge behind it. Could I possibly pull it back? I hardly dared to move for fear of bringing the creature upon me. Slowly, very slowly, I put my hand forward until it grasped the edge of the front, the final bar which protruded through the wall. To my surprise it came quite easily to my jerk. Of course the difficulty of drawing it out arose from the fact that I was clinging to it. I pulled again, and three inches of it came through. It ran apparently on wheels. I pulled again... and then the cat sprang!

It was so quick, so sudden, that I never saw it happen. I simply heard the savage snarl, and in an instant afterwards the blazing yellow eyes, the flattened black head with its red tongue and flashing teeth, were within reach of me. The impact of the creature shook the bars upon which I lay, until I thought (as far as I could think of anything at such a moment) that they were coming down. The cat swayed there for an instant, the head and front paws quite close to me, the hind paws clawing to find a grip upon the edge of the grating. I heard the claws rasping as they clung to the wire netting, and the breath of the beast made me sick. But its bound had been miscalculated. It could not retain its position. Slowly, grinning with rage and scratching madly at the bars, it swung backwards and dropped heavily upon the floor. With a growl it instantly faced round to me and crouched for another spring.

I knew that the next few moments would decide my fate. The creature had learned by experience. It would not miscalculate again. I must act promptly, fearlessly, if I were to have a chance for life. In an instant I had formed my plan. Pulling off my dress-coat, I threw it down over the head of the beast. At the same moment I dropped over the edge, seized the end of the front grating, and pulled it frantically out of the wall.

It came more easily than I could have expected. I rushed across the room, bearing it with me; but, as I rushed, the accident of my position put me upon the outer side. Had it been the other way, I might have come off scathless. As it was, there was a moment's pause as I stopped it and tried to pass in through the opening which I had left. That moment was enough to give time to the creature to toss off the coat with which I had blinded him and to spring upon me. I hurled myself through the gap and pulled the rails to behind

me, but he seized my leg before I could entirely withdraw it. One stroke of that huge paw tore off my calf as a shaving of wood curls off before a plane. The next moment, bleeding and fainting, I was lying among the foul straw with a line of friendly bars between me and the creature which ramped so frantically against them.

Too wounded to move, and too faint to be conscious of fear, I could only lie, more dead than alive, and watch it. It pressed its broad, black chest against the bars and angled for me with its crooked paws as I have seen a kitten do before a mouse-trap. It ripped my clothes, but, stretch as it would, it could not quite reach me. I have heard of the curious numbing effect produced by wounds from the great carnivora, and now I was destined to experience it, for I had lost all sense of personality, and was as interested in the cat's failure or success as if it were some game which I was watching. And then gradually my mind drifted away into strange, vague dreams, always with that black face and red tongue coming back into them, and so I lost myself in the nirvana of delirium, the blessed relief of those who are too sorely tried.

Tracing the course of events afterwards, I conclude that I must have been insensible for about two hours. What roused me to consciousness once more was that sharp metallic click which had been the precursor of my terrible experience. It was the shooting back of the spring lock. Then, before my senses were clear enough to entirely apprehend what they saw, I was aware of the round, benevolent face of my cousin peering in through the opened door. What he saw evidently amazed him. There was the cat crouching on the floor. I was stretched upon my back in my shirt-sleeves within the cage, my trousers torn to ribbons and a great pool of blood all round me. I can see his amazed face now, with the morning sunlight upon it. He peered at me, and peered again. Then he closed the door behind him, and advanced to the cage to see if I were really dead.

I cannot undertake to say what happened. I was not in a fit state to witness or to chronicle such events. I can only say that I was suddenly conscious that his face was away from me — that he was looking towards the animal.

"Good old Tommy!" he cried. "Good old Tommy!"

Then he came near the bars, with his back still towards me.

"Down, you stupid beast!" he roared. "Down, sir! Don't you know your master?"

Suddenly even in my bemuddled brain a remembrance came of those words of his when he had said that the taste of blood would turn the cat into a

fiend. My blood had done it, but he was to pay the price.

"Get away!" he screamed. "Get away, you devil! Baldwin! Baldwin! Oh, my God!"

And then I heard him fall, and rise, and fall again, with a sound like the ripping of sacking. His screams grew fainter until they were lost in the worrying snarl. And then, after I thought that he was dead, I saw, as in a nightmare, a blinded, tattered, blood-soaked figure running wildly round the room — and that was the last glimpse which I had of him before I fainted once again.

I was many months in my recovery — in fact, I cannot say that I have ever recovered, for to the end of my days I shall carry a stick as a sign of my night with the Brazilian cat. Baldwin, the groom, and the other servants could not tell what had occurred when, drawn by the death cries of their master, they found me behind the bars, and his remains — or what they afterwards discovered to be his remains — in the clutch of the creature which he had reared. They stilled him off with hot irons, and afterwards shot him through the loophole of the door before they could finally extricate me. I was carried to my bedroom, and there, under the roof of my would-be murderer, I remained between life and death for several weeks. They had sent for a surgeon from Clipton and a nurse from London, and in a month I was able to be carried to the station, and so conveyed back once more to Grosvenor Mansions.

I have one remembrance of that illness, which might have been part of the ever-changing panorama conjured up by a delirious brain were it not so definitely fixed in my memory. One night, when the nurse was absent, the door of my chamber opened, and a tall woman in blackest mourning slipped into the room. She came across to me, and as she bent her sallow face I saw by the faint gleam of the night-light that it was the Brazilian woman whom my cousin had married. She stared intently into my face, and her expression was more kindly than I had ever seen it. "Are you conscious?" she asked. I feebly nodded — for I was still very weak. "Well, then, I only wished to say to you that you have yourself to blame. Did I not do all I could for you? From the beginning I tried to drive you from the house. By every means, short of betraying my husband, I tried to save you from him. I knew that he had a reason for bringing you here. I knew that he would never let you get away again. No one knew him as I knew him, who had suffered from him so often. I did not dare to tell you all this. He would have killed me. But I did my best for you. As things have turned out, you have been the best friend that I have ever had. You have set me free, and I fancied that nothing but death would do that. I am

sorry if you are hurt, but I cannot reproach myself. I told you that you were a fool — and a fool you have been." She crept out of the room, the bitter, singular woman, and I was never destined to see her again. With what remained from her husband's property she went back to her native land, and I have heard that she afterwards took the veil at Pernambuco.

It was not until I had been back in London for some time that the doctors pronounced me to be well enough to do business. It was not a very welcome permission to me, for I feared that it would be the signal for an inrush of creditors; but it was Summers, my lawyer, who first took advantage of it.

"I am very glad to see that your lordship is so much better," said he. "I have been waiting a long time to offer my congratulations."

"What do you mean, Summers? This is no time for joking."

"I mean what I say," he answered. "You have been Lord Southerton for the last six weeks, but we feared that it would retard your recovery if you were to learn it."

Lord Southerton! One of the richest peers in England! I could not believe my ears. And then suddenly I thought of the time which had elapsed, and how it coincided with my injuries.

"Then Lord Southerton must have died about the same time that I was hurt?"

"His death occurred upon that very day." Summers looked hard at me as I spoke, and I am convinced — for he was a very shrewd fellow — that he had guessed the true state of the case. He paused for a moment as if awaiting a confidence from me, but I could not see what was to be gained by exposing such a family scandal.

"Yes, a very curious coincidence," he continued, with the same knowing look, "Of course, you are aware that your cousin Everard King was the next heir to the estates. Now, if it had been you instead of him who had been torn to pieces by this tiger, or whatever it was, then of course he would have been Lord Southerton at the present moment."

"No doubt," said I.

"And he took such an interest in it," said Summers. "I happen to know that the late Lord Southerton's valet was in his pay, and that he used to have telegrams from him every few hours to tell him how he was getting on. That would be about the time when you were down there. Was it not strange that he should wish to be so well informed, since he knew that he was not the direct heir?"

"Very strange," said I. "And now, Summers, if you will bring me my bills and a new cheque-book, we will begin to get things into order."

Godiva

Lord Alfred Tennyson

I waited for the train at Coventry;
I hung with grooms and porters on the bridge,
To match the three tall spires; and there I shaped
The city's ancient legend into this:—
Not only we, the latest seed of Time,
New men, that in the flying of a wheel
Cry down the past, not only we, that prate
Of rights and wrongs, have loved the people well,
And loathed to see them overtax'd; but she
Did more, and underwent, and overcame,
The woman of a thousand summers back,
Godiva, wife to that grim Earl, who ruled
In Coventry: for when he laid a tax
Upon his town, and all the mothers brought
Their children, clamouring, "If we pay, we
starve!"

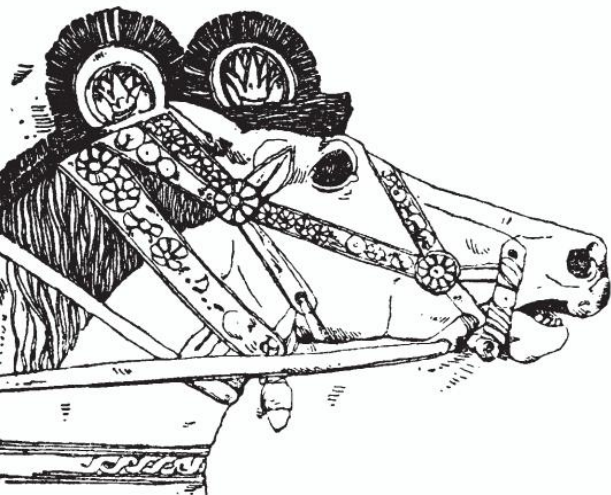
She sought her lord, and found him, where he strode
About the hall, among his dogs, alone,
His beard a foot before him, and his hair
A yard behind. She told him of their tears,
And pray'd him, "If they pay this tax, they starve".
Whereat he stared, replying, half-amazed,
"You would not let your little finger ache
For such as _these?_"--"But I would die," said she.
He laugh'd, and swore by Peter and by Paul;
Then fillip'd at the diamond in her ear;
"O ay, ay, ay, you talk!"--"Alas!" she said,
"But prove me what it is I would not do."
And from a heart as rough as Esau's hand,
He answer'd, "Ride you naked thro' the town,
And I repeal it"; and nodding as in scorn,

Lady Godiva John Collier 1897



He parted, with great strides among his dogs.
 So left alone, the passions of her mind,
 As winds from all the compass shift and blow,
 Made war upon each other for an hour,
 Till pity won. She sent a herald forth,
 And bad him cry, with sound of trumpet, all
 The hard condition; but that she would loose
 The people: therefore, as they loved her well,
 From then till noon no foot should pace the street,
 No eye look down, she passing; but that all
 Should keep within, door shut, and window barr'd.
 Then fled she to her inmost bower, and there
 Unclasp'd the wedded eagles of her belt,
 The grim Earl's gift; but ever at a breath
 She linger'd, looking like a summer moon
 Half-dipt in cloud: anon she shook her head,
 And shower'd the rippled ringlets to her knee;
 Unclad herself in haste; adown the stair
 Stole on; and, like a creeping sunbeam, slid
 From pillar unto pillar, until she reach'd
 The gateway; there she found her palfrey trapt
 In purple blazon'd with armorial gold.
 Then she rode forth, clothed on with chastity:
 The deep air listen'd round her as she rode,
 And all the low wind hardly breathed for fear.
 The little wide-mouth'd heads upon the spout
 Had cunning eyes to see: the barking cur
 Made her cheek flame: her palfrey's footfall shot
 Light horrors thro' her pulses: the blind walls
 Were full of chinks and holes; and overhead
 Fantastic gables, crowding, stared: but she
 Not less thro' all bore up, till, last, she saw
 The white-flower'd elder-thicket from the field
 Gleam thro' the Gothic archways [3]in the wall.

Then she rode back cloth'd on with chastity:
 And one low churl, compact of thankless earth,
 The fatal byword of all years to come,
 Boring a little auger-hole in fear,
 Peep'd--but his eyes, before they had their will,
 Were shrivell'd into darkness in his head,
 And dropt before him. So the Powers, who wait
 On noble deeds, cancell'd a sense misused;
 And she, that knew not, pass'd: and all at once,
 With twelve great shocks of sound, the shameless noon
 Was clash'd and hammer'd from a hundred towers,
 One after one: but even then she gain'd
 Her bower; whence reissuing, robed and crown'd,
 To meet her lord, she took the tax away,
 And built herself an everlasting name.



Lady Godiva Jules Joseph Lefebvre



A Quiet Deep

A short love poem

Thorny thistles brushed by the breeze
Sent from stormy, cloudy seas;
But nestled with you, my liquid sleep,
I rest and feel a quiet deep.

Lightning shadows distant crags,
The angry fangs—the thunder lags;
But when you're in my arms so sweet,
I rest and feel a quiet deep.

The storm winds clatter at my door
Persistent, hungry, wanting more;
So dreams of you I often keep
To rest and feel a quiet deep.

When I'm alone, when we're apart,
When tears flow freely in the dark,
I curl up in bed; I count our sheep;
I rest and feel a quiet deep,
Because, someday, in future near
I know I won't be waiting here
To hear you running, to watch you leap
Into my arms, your quiet deep.

Until that day, I ache and weep
For you, my love, my quiet deep.



MILES MACNAUGHTON

Featured Artist

Casting Stones

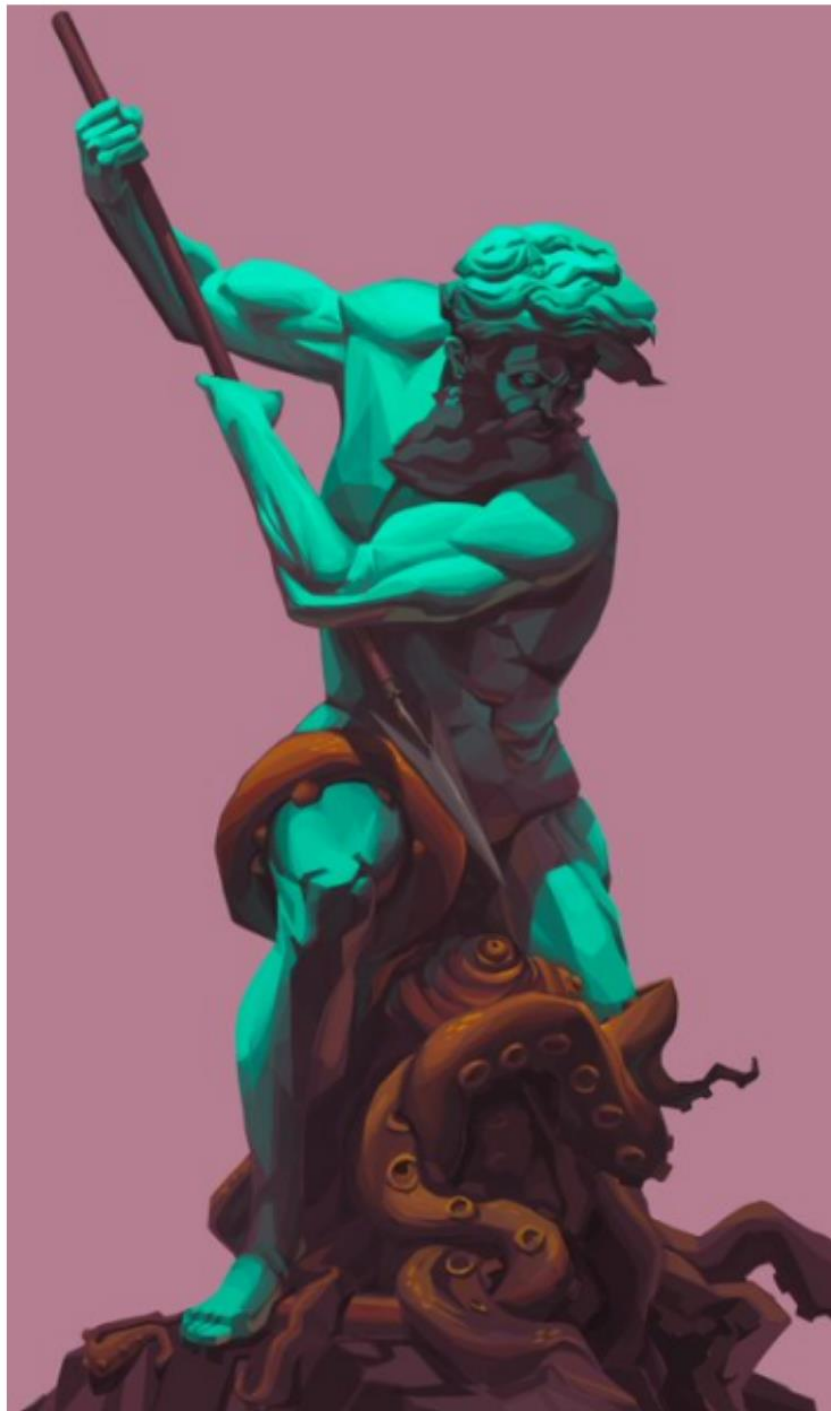
Twitter/X: StonesCasting
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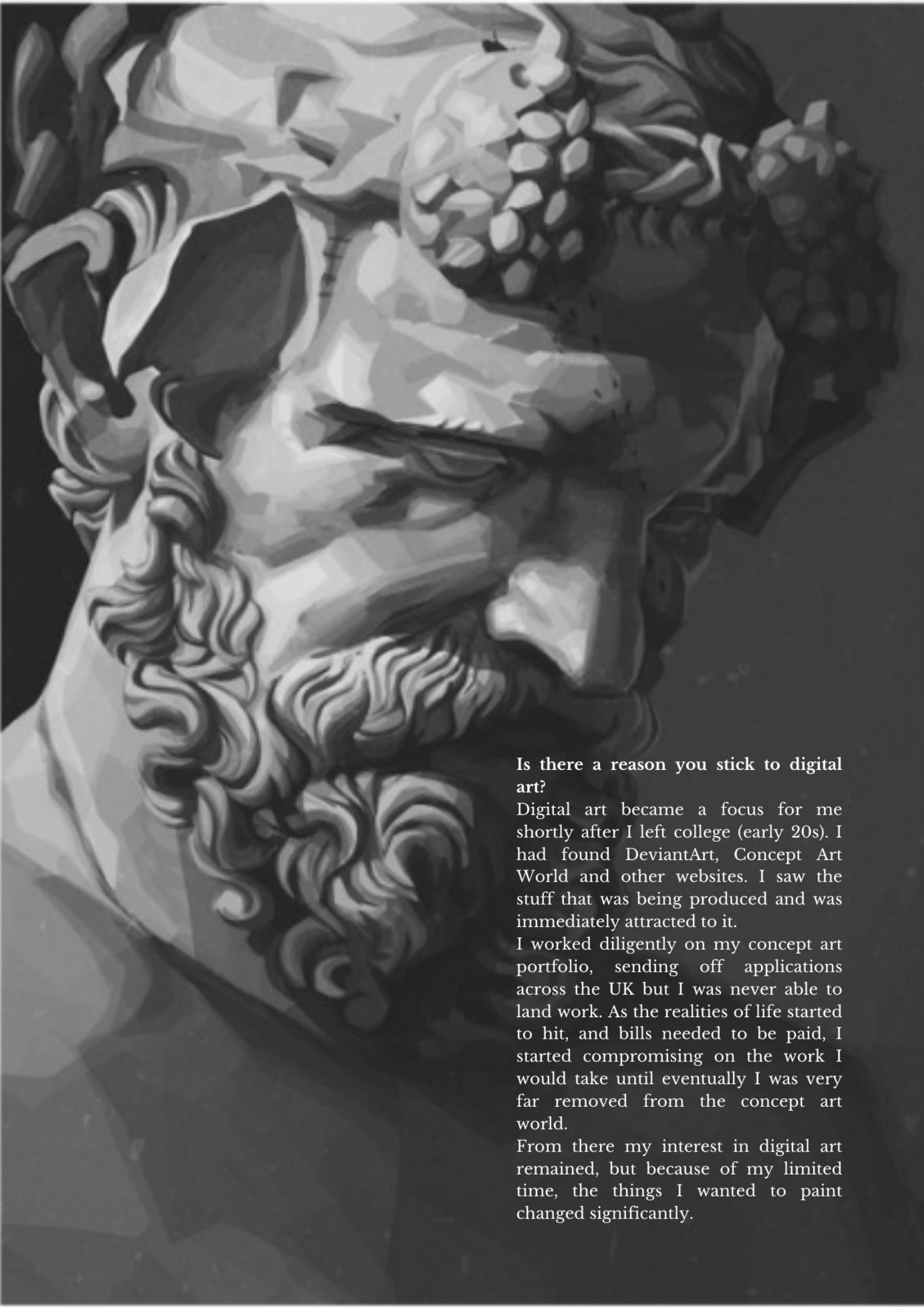
Tell us a little bit about yourself. I have been drawing and painting in some form since I was a child. Whatever other interests or hobbies I developed an interest in always slotted in around my desire to create.

Throughout school I would spend whatever spare time I could in the art rooms, making use of the limited resources available to me at the time.

As I got older, I went to study first at university, then at college but I never really engaged with either of them fully. This is partly due to the environment but mostly due to the large quantities of extra curricular substances I decided to abuse.

It took some time for me to get my head straight, but even during the darkest parts of my life, I was always drawing. It has been and will remain a lifeline for me in a way that I cannot fully explain.





Is there a reason you stick to digital art?

Digital art became a focus for me shortly after I left college (early 20s). I had found DeviantArt, Concept Art World and other websites. I saw the stuff that was being produced and was immediately attracted to it.

I worked diligently on my concept art portfolio, sending off applications across the UK but I was never able to land work. As the realities of life started to hit, and bills needed to be paid, I started compromising on the work I would take until eventually I was very far removed from the concept art world.

From there my interest in digital art remained, but because of my limited time, the things I wanted to paint changed significantly.

Why are there so many mythical motifs in your work?

The mythical world had been some of the first artworks I was exposed to. My parents would take me to our local art galleries whenever they could. I would spend hours walking amongst the sculptures and paintings.

The desire to capture these archetypal beings has never left me, and during recent years it has come bubbling to the surface and demanded to be let out.

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

I read a lot of art books, either about one artist in particular or about the arts in general.

Currently I am re-reading some Andrew Loomis and a book about Doré Illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy. Prior to that I had been reading the collected works of Sergio Toppi.

Aside from painting, do you have any other passions?

As my kids have gotten a little older and are running about, I have developed quite a keen interest in gardening. Watching them show interest in the plants growing and blooming has been pretty incredible.

Otherwise I have taken up BJJ again, and have been back at it for the last few months.





THE CAPTAIN



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LR Scott's Lore



The Dragon

The captain looks at the distant storm clouds and shudders, that chill that rides up from his tailbone to his neck, causing an involuntary shiver.

“What is it, Cap’n?”

He closes his eyes, and remembers...

= = =

The Old Wizard sprawled a big map out over two tables he had forced together.

“Just a moment, just a moment,” The Old Wizard had said, pulling some glass lens out from a shamble of shelves and lab equipment. The captain could hardly step anywhere in this room without tripping over some pile of books or a flask with an exotic looking colored liquid.

“Here! Take a look.” The old wizard handed the captain the lens.

“What am I looking at, old man?” the captain had said.

“This, my boy, is a map of the world. If you’re going on an expedition you’ll need to know it.”

“If it’s already on a map it’s precisely what I don’t need. I’m going off the edge of the world!”

“Perhaps you hadn’t noticed...” The old man had pushed the lens over a more empty part of the map. It said, *Here there be dragons*, and had an almost comical drawing of some serpent.

“You don’t expect me to believe in dragons, do you?”

“Oh, I most certainly do! If you’re going off the map, you *need* to know about them.”

“What do I need to know?”

“That we know almost nothing about them.”

“How is that supposed to help?”

“It’s, uh, well, I see how it doesn’t. But knowing what you don’t know is the first step to learning what you don’t know, so you start to know what you know and don’t know what you d—”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“Now see here. Is it any wonder we don’t know about dragons? They *thrive* in the unknown! They don’t just live in the mystery, they *are* the mystery. The more we discover, the fewer dragons there are.”

“And what do you want me to do if I encounter one?”

“Hope it doesn’t notice you!”

“And if it does?”

The old wizard had paused, and looked the captain dead in the eyes. He said, quietly: “Hang on.”

= = =

The captain looks back at the mass of clouds, the darkness beneath, the flash of lightning and thunder. He thinks he sees the massive beating of giant wings within the clouds.

“Captain? What do you see?”

“A dragon.” Thunder rumbled over the ship, from the distant storm.

“What do we do?”

The captain turns, and looks his first mate dead in the eyes. He says, quietly: “Hang on.”

The Magic 8 Ball

“Magic 8-ball, do you really know everything?” He shook the Magic 8-ball and yawned, bored at his desk.

“As I see it, yes.”

He smirked. *Of course you would say that*, he thought. *I should give you a real challenge. Something interesting.*

“How old will I be when I die?”

The 8-ball refused to offer an answer. “Oh, I guess it needs to be a yes/no thing. Right.” He thought about the best way to ask the question.

“Magic 8-ball, will I be older than 50 years old when I die?” That seemed like a reasonable midpoint, he could zero in on the date and time with subsequent questions.

“Very doubtful.”

Ok that’s not so bad. It’s uncertain. There seems to be a chance, but let’s eliminate the alternative.

“Magic 8-ball, will I be younger than 50 years old when I die?”

“Without a doubt.”

That’s actually a lot worse.

There was a commotion outside his office. He barely registered the noise, because of his now rapt fixation on the novelty toy.

Ok so...same plan. Let’s narrow it down.

“Magic 8-ball, will I die within the next 5 years?”

“It is certain.”

The noise outside rose, it sounded like people were shouting. He looked up, out the window in his door, and saw masked men rummaging through the cubicles outside.

“Magic 8-ball, will I—”

The men barged into the room, shouting. A shot fired.

The magic 8 ball rolled on the floor, until it came to a stop.

“Yes.”

Gotland

Part 3

ND Wallace Swan



The two men at the bow jump down onto the sandy beach. With ropes they drag it up onto the shore. Four more men soon follow them and pull it further, and soon the rest of the party disembarks, including Thora, Prooti, Finnhrjolf, and Frithogar.

“We’ll camp here until the fog clears.” commands Frithogar.

The men pull the ship up onto the beach, so that they could use the side of it to help secure the shelters. Prooti retrieves dried sheep’s dung and starts a fire in a pit he dug nearby.

“Finn, go and fetch some wood if you can, dry, sticks, driftwood, doesn’t matter.” Prooti asks.

“Right away!” an energetic Finnhrjolf replies, climbing up a small sandy hill, walking out of Prooti’s view.

Other men unload the camp supplies, and soon begin to set up the small camp. Thora watches Prooti trying to set the dung ablaze.

Prooti could feel her staring, turns his head towards her and said; “What are you looking at, woman?”

“I just see my husband playing with poo. It made me curious. It is a curious sight, no?” she says, chuckling.

Prooti scoffs, and keeps with the firestarter, flicking sparks at the dung. Thora walks over.

“Hold still...” Thora says. Reaching into Prooti’s shirt, she plucks a chest hair out from around his left nipple.

“OWW! Woman! Must you pull out my hairs?”

She ignores him and plucks out one of her armpit hairs and twirls the two together, wetting them in her mouth and straightening them. Then, holding them up, she whispers something inaudible, and blows on them. A small fire was burning at the tip.

She holds the flame on the dung until it takes. Shaking her hand, she puts out the hairs and flicks them away.

A stunned Prooti, stops flicking his stone, stands upright and grabs Thora tightly.

“It appears you have many talents.” at this Thora blushes.

“I am a woman. There is more to us than humping.”

They sit down by the fire, keeping an eye on it, with Thora leaning into Prooti. Time felt like it stood still for them at this moment.

Frithogar meanwhile decides to go on a quick survey of the island, to see if he can get his bearings before settling in for the night.

He walks along the beach towards a rising cliff’s edge. As he approaches he sees a cliff that has some ancient ash trees at its base, which are about three men high. The cliff is about three or four of these trees high, which Frithogar estimates in his mind for the cliff to be about ten or so men high, give or take. The cliff seems to

taper towards his right, and so he heads that direction. As he walks, he notes how many paces he has travelled.

When he gets to the place where the cliff blends into the lower scrubland on which he walks, he counts eight hundred and twenty-two steps. He climbs up the ramping edge and is soon at the top of the cliffs he saw earlier. The fog begins to drift away from that side of the island, and he can make out its shape on the one side. This wasn’t Gotland, because he can now see Gotland off in the distance from the island he’s on. Gotland stretches out far from his view, completely covered in dense forest from his vantage point. He decides to circle the island, and as he does the fog clears out, seeming to move towards the sea. Arriving back at the camp, he counts roughly forty-four hundred paces.

“We will arrive in Gotland tomorrow.” Frithogar announces to his party. “We only just missed it because this island got in the way,” he jokes.

Finn was piling up wood around Prooti’s fire. Prooti and Thora were gone.

“Where is Prooti?” Frithogar asked Finn.

“He asked me to watch the fire, he and Thora went that way.” Finn points towards the cliffs just past the plain of shallow grass, a few hundred paces away.

“Ah.” replies Frithogar, who then went to his pack and pulled out some dried fish and bread to fill his growling stomach.

Soon the couple returns, in a jolly mood.

“What’ve you two been up to?” asks Frithogar, with a nod and a wink.

“We were exploring some caves, over there by the cliffs.”

“I was there earlier and I saw no caves.” replies Frithogar.

Thora says, “You probably just didn’t look *close* enough. When we were there there certainly were caves.”

“Strange of me to have missed them,” said Frithogar.

“Perhaps there is more to this woman than *meets the eye*.”

“Oh that’s the case with this one!” said Prooti, happily

The sun was beginning to set, and so the party settled down for the night. Frithogar watches the flames weaken as he removes his shoes and lays back on his bedding. Sleep soon overcomes him as the soothing dance of light induces the peaceful drift into slumber. The fire slowly dies out as it digests the remaining firewood.

Frithogar soon vivifies and finds himself staring into a bright blue sky, whilst he lay in tall green grass. He sits himself up and he sees a wide open field, an endless plain surrounding him in all directions. Flowers dance all around him in the gentle wind. Purple, blue, golden yellow, fluttering all around him. The grass is up to his

shoulders while sitting. Frithogor stands up, smelling the sweet aroma of the flowers. The only sound is that of the wafting of the colourful fields.

Suddenly, the wind stops, the fields become eerily still. An instinctual panic besets Frithogor. He can feel a weight dragging behind him as he steps forward through the grass, a strange feeling comes over him, and so, turning around, he is astonished to see a long pink tail, like that of a gigantic rodent following him, protruding out of the back of his trousers.

I cannot have a tail. He thinks to himself. As if compelled by a spirit, Frithogor picks up his tail and takes a large bite out of it. *The pain is unbearable.* He thinks to himself.

“AHH!” He screams. “OWW!” As he continues to eliminate the threat to his continued humanity. Blood sprays and then drips from his tail and mouth, his stomach fills with the wretched flesh and bone, as Frithogor’s teeth crunch and slice away at the unwanted mass of transformation. His panic-stricken, unthinking drive to devour this tail, soon numbs the pain. He is soon contorted, wrapped in a human loop of pain and angry bloodlust. Reaching the end of the tail, and with a final sickening, crunching bite, Frithogor is released from his miniature living hell. His entire body, now nude, covered in blood and mucus, a great gaping wound at his rear near the tailbone, and a stomach filled with the abomination.

Feeling sick, he senses his stomach coiling around itself, spinning inside. A very naked Frithogor leans down to vomit the putrid tail, soon from his throat emerges a long slimy tail. From his belly he births this snake.

The snake is about the size of a thin birch branch as it exits his mouth, his stomach now completely empty. The snake slithers into the grass ahead of him. *Is it growing?* Thinks an exhausted Frithogor, who sees it gradually increase in size.

The grass before him begins to flatten as the snake quickly expands. In a breath it was as large as Frithogor’s arm, the next, two of his arms, and the next after it was longer than two men and as thick as a man’s thigh. As it grows it encircles Frithogor in a broad expanding loop. The serpent grows so large that the vibrations from its movements flatten the grass all around it, revealing pools of blood around Frithogor, some still dripping from his self-inflicted wounds.

Half dazed from the bleeding and the broken feeling from auto-cannibalization, he stares confused at the great and growing serpent, which soon encircles him like great fortress walls, much larger than that of his home Bierde. These walls cast shadows upon all within his encirclement, and so a great darkening chill begins to affect Frithogor, and his movements slow.

The great serpent finally stops growing, his body some seven men high. His skin sticky with oil, his head the size of a longship, hisses a discernible voice.

“Frithogor Brandorsson Baldursson Odinson, I am the Jormundandr, the World Serpent. You devoured me, and gave me life through the sacrifice. I gave you great pain, great suffering... your blood fills the oceans, your beard begets the forests, your sight begets the skies above and the great expanding plains. Time, you grant to the world like a debtee unpaid. Both space and time is what you offer. Glowing eyed slayer of Ymir, the debtee reaps his due, for until the day which Thor makes right, and cleaves Jormunandr in two.”

Frithogor, frozen, is unable to move. His feet root into the ground as the serpent appears to shrink around him, but expanding out in a large broad arc. Arms branch out from his sides and with each drop of blood from his wound he grows taller, wider. Leaves sprout from his arm and fingers as his body stiffens more and more. Soon he stands above the worlds, up into the realm of the Aesir. As his head ascends the veil, and he sees *Him*.

Eyes to eye with the Allfather, who, wrapped in gilded garments, holding the hand of the delicate Frigg, who in turn has held in her arm the gleaming child, Baldur.

Grandfather? Thinks Frithogor, his mouth shut stiff and sealed by bark.

Odin releases Frigg’s hand. Frigg looks on at the Yggdrasilic Frithogor, a great permeating smile warms him deeply within. But as this happens, Odin touches him.

“Begone.”

Frithogor awakens by the smouldering fire. Opening his eyes he sees Prooti packing away his things, while others work at putting away the camp. In a slight daze, Frithogor reaches at his tailbone and feels around. *It is fine.* He thinks to himself. *It must have been a dream.*

Finding his bearings, he stands up and silently packs up his bedding, gear, and clothes. He tightly secures it within his hide-wrapping, tying off the ends to keep everything dry. Picking it up he brings it to the supply pile, leaving it there until the ship is readied.

“Prooti!” Calls Frithogor, “Let’s get the ship back into the water. Gather the men.”

Prooti nods, and brings the men to the ship. With a mighty heave, and some struggle, the ship is turned right side up, and pushed into the water. It is anchored in place by ropes and stakes so it can be loaded back up with supplies before they leave the island. Men right the mast in preparation for sail.

“This island here is called *The Little One*. You can see *The Big One* over there, to the west, we must have barely missed it in the fog. Gotland is to our east, you can see the forested shoreline from the tops of those cliffs, we are not far. We will make landfall in a few hours,

maybe less.” Frithogar says to Prooti and some of the men as they work to load the ship. Finn tosses loads up to the bow, where another man catches them and puts it aboard for another to take and secure to the storage below the decking of the relatively small vessel.

With the ship loaded, the stake is released, and the vessel is gradually pushed out to sea, with more and more of the party climbing aboard as the ship inches its way out. Soon the ship is gliding on the water and the men don their oars to row their way out away from the small island.

“Unfurl the sail!” cries Frithogar, as the wind picks up and blows northwards. The sail quickly catches the winds and the oars are brought into the ship. Prooti at the rudder, steers the ship towards the northeast, and is soon skirting the Gotland coast. The crew keeps an eye out for a good landing spot, preferably one with a sandy beach.

Before noon, they spot a beavh in a small bay, and so they head towards land. Near the entrance of the bay they put up the sail, and bring out the oars. Therein they row towards the beach, which is much thinner than the one from the smaller island, and make landfall. The party get off the ship and with great teamwork, haul the ship up onto land, and secure it to a few strong trees a bit back from the shoreline.

The group then set to work setting up a more long term camp. They deploy their full complement of gear, with a fire pit and roasting spit. A few of the men set out to gather wood with their sharp axes.

Frithogar says to the group, “We will all stay here for a few days to set up camp. Then some of us will remain here, whilst myself and an entourage will head off to find locals and hopefully find our way to *Óðinsvöllur*.”

Finn asks Frithogar, “What is that?”

“It is the place where it is said the Allfather ascended to Asgarda. Where he took the hand of Frigg and disappeared into the sky where they still live.” he answers.

“How do you know that?” replies a genuinely curious Finn.

“It was taught to me by my Motherfather, who was great friends of my father Brandor Baldursson. He told me my father was a demigod.”

“Well, doesn’t that make you a demigod as well?” Jokes Finn.

“It makes me nothing, the divine blood has been thinned too much by mortals, and so I am, as you can clearly see, a mere mortal man like you. Like all men I must seek out greatness and conquer it. No man is born with it, but must seek it. At least that is what I was told. What do you think, Finn?”

“All that I know is that we belong to the Gods.” says Finn in return.

Nodding in response, Frithogar leaves, and heads to retrieve his hunting bow from the ship.

“Finn, would you like to join me on a hunt?”

The young man replies, “Certainly I do.” and he went to grab his gear, returning soon after, and the two headed off.

The in-law pair, a Chief and an heir, made their way to a meadow beyond the forest. Frithogar, an experienced hunter, kept an eye on the forest floor, and soon they came across a deer nest.

In a low whisper, Frithogar says to Finn, “*You see the grass, it is swirled, flattened? A deer or maybe a few of them slept here in the night. Look, you can see the tracks which follow to it. You can see how they come in, spin around, disturb the grass, and then exit the same way they came in, but they head this way follow me...*”

Finn nods while listening to Frithogar’s lesson. There were not many deer on Öland, so he was inexperienced, but interested. They two follow the tracks quietly, careful to remain downwind of the direction of the tracks, which snake in and out of the bushes, into the fields, and back again, circling the open field.

“*The deer is nervous. Predators. Sometimes the gods speak to us in such ways if we are keen to hear it.*” Frithogar whispers to Finn.

Soon, they spot a young deer feasting on some low branches.

“*It is young and fat.*” Whispers Frithogar, drawing an arrow from his quiver. The wind calms. Frithogar takes aim, only some thirty or so paces from the plump, juicy animal. He aims right above its heart. Frithogar lets loose the projectile, which plunges straight through the heart, and out the other side.

The creature suddenly leaps up, and starts running towards the two men. But not for long. After two tremendous jumps, blood spraying wildly in its last gasps of mortality, it keels over. Silence. Quickly thanking the Gods for their good fortune, Frithogar checks that the animal is dead. He then hacks off a decently straight branch from a nearby ash, and scrapes off the smaller foliage. Finnhjrolf watches as Frithogar ties the creature’s legs to the improvised pole, and with a man on each side, makes easy work lifting and taking the carcass back to camp.

“Dinner is ready!” yells Frithogar to the camp. With a heave the two men plop the deer down for all to see.

“I will clean it.” volunteers Thora, “I am of some use.”

Thora sets to work cleaning the carcass, and prepares it for roasting. The camp celebrates as the fresh meat is very much welcome. Two men soon return with skins of water to boil for drinking. There is a stream which empties into the bay nearby. After the feast all the good meat was gone, and after removing the antlers,

some of the men buried the remains in a deep hole in the sand so as not to attract predators in the night. They put up their tents and fall to sleep, with a man keeping watch in shifts to keep the party safe from lurking dangers.

At first light the party gathers their belongings, and while three men remain at the camp, the remainder head inland with supplies along with Frithogar who is looking for the *Hall*. He doesn't know much about this hall, only that it is supposedly there, perhaps in ruins or abandoned.

"Do you know where this Hall is, Frithogar?" asks Prooti.

"It is said to be surrounded by forest but on a low flat clearing of stone, near the top of that hill in the distance." Frithogar pointed towards a hill, a few miles away to the Northeast. "We'll head there and should be there before midday. I may not even be correct, it could be a hill further away."

As the party moves through thick brush, they come across a deer path which seems to lead in the direction of the hill, and decide to follow it. It wound in and around trees, but keeps a decent line towards the Northeast in general, all the while they are gaining in elevation.

Ahead, they see a strange shape in a tree, and so approach it out of curiosity, leaving one pathway to another in doing so. Soon they reach the object and see it's the skeletal remains of a deer or something similar, strung to the tree which now grew around the bones. It is old, the bones bleach white except for a black cross painted across the dry, white skull.

"It is a *suavastika*." says Frithogar.

"What does it mean?" asks Prooti.

"It depends. It can mean fortune. But it can also mean sweeping away or transformation. Perhaps we will find more and be able to discern."

Further down this pathway they see another figure in a tree. This time it is the remains of a man, with the same cross on the skull. His hands had been tied above his head and nailed into the tree at the wrist. His feet were tied together around the tree and behind him, secured together at the ankles. There was a large spike through his chest and spine, also secured into the trunk of the tree. The mass of the tree was growing around the remains, seeming to slowly swallow him, except his legs which were being slowly stretched out as the tree grew, its expanding trunk tight against the bones, as if one day the tension might have them break in a burst.

It was an amazing sight to behold for the party, and they stared at it for some time. Frithogar hurried them along to continue their route.

"Keep moving. If this is any indication there will be more to see."

They continued to walk along the trail and it seemed to climb the hill in a circle, so Frithogar cut up the hill directly towards the high point. The party followed him. Soon they came to a small clearing, and there they saw a man, his skin as black as tar, standing guard outside of what looked to be an otherwise abandoned hall.

"HALT!" Yelled the man. "Who goes there?" He said weakly, coughing, his decrepit body becoming more and more apparent as they neared.

"Hail Guard, I am Frithogar, son of Baldur Odinson. I come to see the grave of my Grandfather and Grandmother."

"You prove this, and you may enter, but none others may pass or they will be tree folk until death and then forevermore."

"How do I prove this, *Guard*?" asks Frithogar.

"My name is no Guard, is Nmbambo. I the black adopted son of Yaarko, King the Samyoed. You drink from here cup. If you not blood of Odin and Frigg, your flesh melt away as ash and all that be left is bones and I hang you from tree with symbol. If you are, you will be able to safely enter. UKUFA OKUNQOBA!"

Frithogar looked a bit nervous. But he took the cup from Nmbambo and took a drink. He was fine. Invigorated in fact. Nmbambo smiled at Frithogar, and in a moment, crumbled into dust right in front of the party, eliciting screams from Thora and Finnhjolf, and gasps from the men, except Prooti who looked baffled. The door of the decrepit hall squeaks open.

"Do not follow me, or suffer death." Frithogar entered the decrepit hall. He closed the door behind him, and suddenly he could hear music and lively dancing, the sounds of warrior men drinking and laughing, a grand party was taking place behind these doors. As he turned into the room a man approached him, with two young women, offering him fresh grapes and giggling and laughing like drunken idiots. Frithogar of course ate the grapes, which tasted like nothing he had ever eaten before in his life.

His mind cleared and he could feel his body growing in strength. The shirt he was wearing felt tighter and tighter, and began to tear, along with his pants. Soon he was standing with the body of a god covered in dangling rags. His hair turned golden, glowing as if on fire, but it was not hot. He tries to speak but his words sound like flowing water down a stream. The others in the hall seem to understand what he has said and beckon him towards a man on a throne. On one side of him stands a man with one eye, and a woman. On the other side there is a large, broad shouldered man at ease with a sword that is ludicrously large.

The man on the throne spoke with his voice coming out as thunder and crashing rocks. But he could understand the word:

"I am Finn, Lord of all creation. Gaze upon my works and despair, rejoice, be grateful! I was here before time itself."

"I am Frithogar. I came to meet my Ancestors."

"Baldursson. Your father, Baldur, is here on my left. You see his hair is golden like yours. He is strong and carries a large sword to protect me. This is why I brought him here before your birth. He is here to defend against the entropic forces. Odin here is on my right with his wife Frigg. Baldur is their Golden-Child. Baldur, speak!"

"Son, I was called to Val to defend the Gods. I was told you would grow to be a fine warrior regardless and I know I see this now. What does the future hold for you my son?" says Baldur.

"Mother is healthy, her father is still well. I am here by some drive I didn't fully understand until now and..."

"You still don't understand. Not yet. Not why. You only know you are here and were driven here like a compass points north. There is a runestone in Svealand where you will find the key of your destiny. I can tell you no more or I will ruin Midgard. You carry my honour with you..." as Baldur said that last word, all that followed were sounds of crashing waves and thunder claps escaping his mouth.

Frithogar nodded, trying hard to absorb all to which he was witness. Finn raised his voice once more, "Odin, speak now."

"Frithogar, you are perhaps destined here, or not, should you be the best of warriors then it is so. But worthy too it is to conquer the whole earth. Men on massive ships and within metallic birds, thunderous destruction and mayhem! Death at all corners of the world! Dragons gone but no matter because they would fear men, even the meekest of them! So we must hold our noses to it! Eyes averted and souls on fire to an adventure which knows no end! All this is yours to have and hold in death. Through life's lives it spreads like a phoenix over aeons and blasts apart the subjugating forces of desire and destruction. But how to escape this cruel fate through life without the existential pains of death and mortality?"

"I don't...know...I..." mumbles Frithogar.

"This is the way. Not knowing is the key and you may very well know that I know this, for it was in my eye's loss that I know... that I know my fate before the dreaded wolf. The fates of my sons and grandsons and the like through the battle of evil in Ragnarok at the end of the game. But I am not playing a game any more. I simply am the game. I am the blind guest, the nesting raven in the peak of the barn. I am inevitable."

"Frigg, do." Finn says.

"I am the fathermother. In birth I near died but was saved when the walls fell and the chaos rushed in.

Then Baldur slayed these beasts and in doing so marked his austere fortunes by the beat of his weapon into the bodies of the forces of death. But the beat doesn't end for such a warrior and in the end Finn claimed him too and here we all stand at his side lamenting mortality and feasting upon peeled grapes and the smokes of *sacrifice*."

"ENOUGH!" shouts Finn. "Take this sword. Its name is Headshearer. It is powerful and any who bear it become invincible. Know that once it is unsheathed it cannot be sheathed until it has tasted blood. Now go! Go back to your party and begone! Never return or you will be melted into dust!"

Frithogar nodded, bowed slightly, then backed away, turning towards the entrance, moving quickly as fear rose inside him. The nymphs opened the door and he quickly exited. Turning around the door slammed shut and the entire hall blew away in the light wind, leaving nothing but a slab of rock surrounded by trees and forest.

"What happened?" Asks Prooti.

"I spoke with the Gods? My father? Finn? He gave me this sword, *Headshearer*."

"It looks very nice, a golden hilt! May I see it?" Asks Prooti.

"No. I am told it is powerful but I cannot sheath it once unsheathed until it tastes blood."

The party follows their tracks back to the landing spot and meets the rest of the party. It is late so they decide to gather firewood and camp for the night.

Frithogar tells the whole party in great detail of his experience. Thora is quite keen. She shows a lot of interest in the sword, and is curious how it works.

"What if you only unsheathed it partially?" She asks.

"I do not know. Better not to risk it." Replies Frithogar.

"Yeah you are probably right," says Thora.

As darkness approaches, the party settles into their sleeping tents.

In the middle of the night, Thora awakens and leaves her and Prooti's tent. She wanders towards the sword, which Frithogar has placed leaning against a pile of supplies. He has secured the sword in place so it will not accidentally leave the sheathe, in order to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. But Thora is very curious. She undoes the strap which secures the sword, and tugs on the hilt lightly, which pulls the sword out a hair's breadth. But she cannot push it back in. While trying to push it back in she accidentally pulls it out even more, but it will not go back inside, now it is a finger's width out of the sheathe. She pulls the whole sword out, and makes a small cut in her hand, and wipes the small amount of blood onto the blade, and tries to put the sword back into its sheath. It still won't go in.

A feeling of madness overcomes her. The sword raises up her arm, and in fear she calls for her husband.

“Prooti!”

Prooti awakes to the yell for help.

“What are you doing Thora? Why are you holding the sword? Why have you unsheathed it? Why is it covered in blood? Why are you bleeding?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know!” She sobs, screaming in regret. “AHHHHH!!”

“Wait just a moment! Wait!” Prooti gasps.

The sword comes down and sweeps across the neck of Prooti, separating his head from his body. Blood squirts from his headless neck as his head rolls from his shoulders and onto the ground in front of them. Thora screams a shriek so vile and loud that birds flee the forest and into the sky. The camp awakens to the scene. Thora finally sheathes the sword.

“WHAT?” yells Frithogar. “What have you done?”

Frithogar falls to his knees in agony at the sight of his dead friend. He picks up his head and brushes his hair from his face. “Why!!!?” He yells. He sees Thora holding the sheathed sword.

“I...I...I killed him...it was an accident...I didn’t mean to...I couldn’t control the sword...”

Frithogar seizes Thora, and with help from the other men, tie her up securely. They sit her down.

“Do you know the punishment for husband murder?”

“No. Not good though. But it was an accident! I didn’t mean to!”

“You didn’t mean to pick up and unsheathe the sword?”

“No, well...yes..but I didn’t mean to kill anyone, especially my beloved Prooti!”

“You will be drowned. At first light. That is the custom. The gods demand it.” Replies Frithogar.

“You cannot! I carry his child!”

Frithogar took pause. “Well then by custom we will wait and see if you do, and if you do, you are thrall to this child, as the seed speaks for the slain father. You are lucky I don’t drown you anyways. You are lucky I am a man of good conscience. I would drown you otherwise. You shall be tied up at night. But why woman? Why could you not control yourself? Why did you need to do so? Was it worth it to see your husband’s head and corpse fall before your feet?”

Thora sobbed and wailed uncontrollably, slowly shrinking into a quivering ball of sadness, sweat, tears; a sputtering orchestra of delirium. Some of the men stayed behind to guard, but Frithogar and the others carried the body of Prooti and his head into the woods, for burial.

As the grave was filled back in with dirt, Frithogar said his final farewell to his best friend.

“I have seen Val. I will see you there one day. Say hello to the fallen for me, and put in a good word.”

They made their way back to the camp, and began to pack it up. No one felt like sleeping after what had happened. They sailed for Öland.



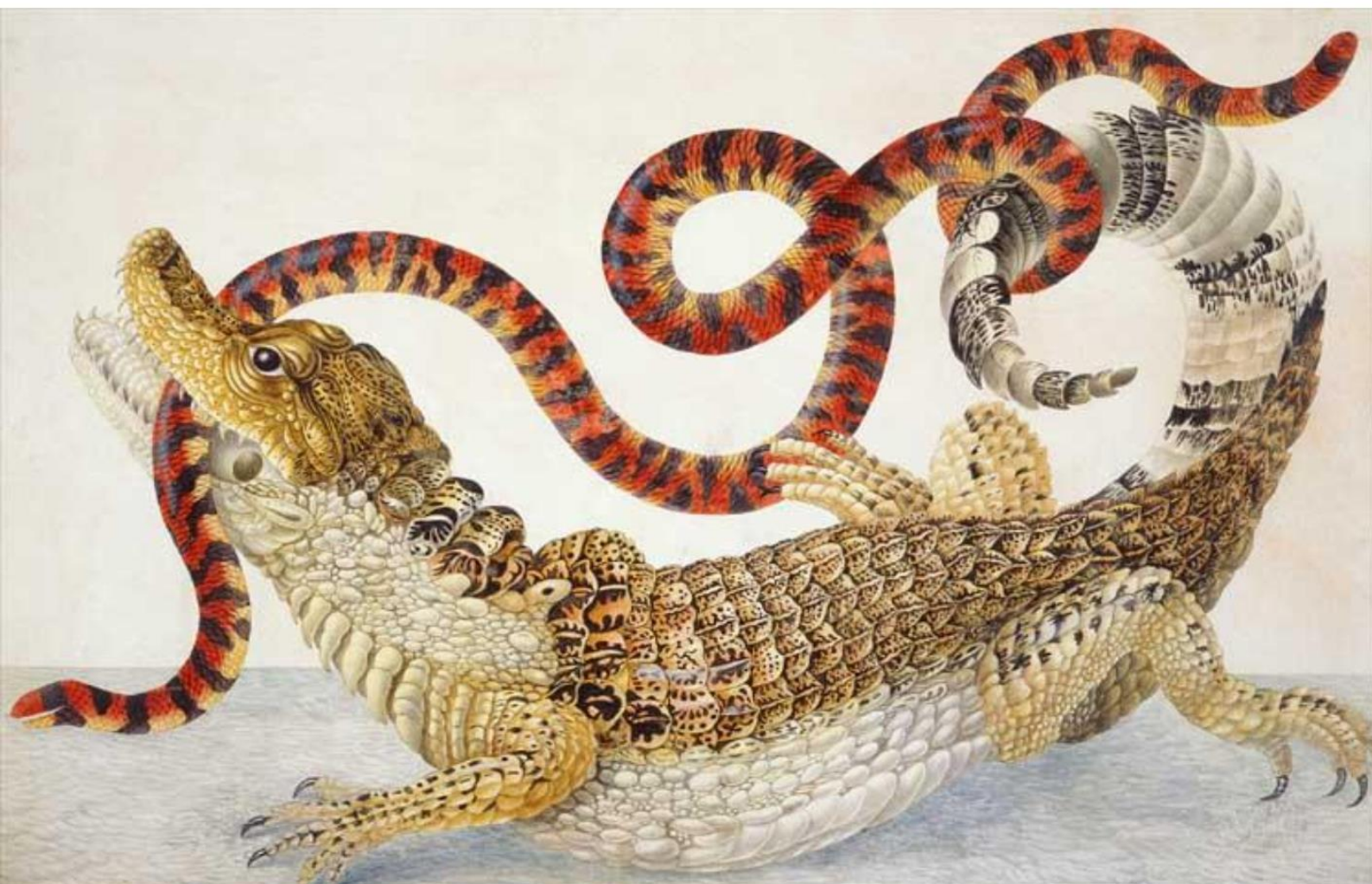
Druid

Without a Home

Chapter 9

The Desert Caravan

Call of the Shieldmaiden



Spectacled Caiman (*Caiman crocodilus*) and a False Coral Snake (*Anilius scytale*) Maria Sibylla Merian

For a day or so the weather in Claytonious was glorious, but that was soon to change. The storm clouds gathered above the city one day as noon approached, like a herd of black elephants ready to rumble a village. People frequently looked out of their windows to gauge their impending doom. Down at the port, men bustled about securing ships and yelling spiritedly.

Basil had the day off, since boats' crews saw the clouds coming and stayed in port. These kinds of storms were expected in the hot summer months, and despite the harbour being great at other times of the year, it was not quite protected enough to shelter small boats during the biggest storms. Fishermen carried their small boats up through the town to tie them down in their courtyards and the streets.

Degore and Clancy helped Komodo George and Basil carry the little red and green boat up to the house. It was set upside down in the courtyard out of the way of the washerwoman, a tall woman with powerful shoulders and a cheerful face, who was elbow deep in suds. Clancy came over to help her. For some reason, she found it funny that he knew how to do laundry and was willing to do so.

"Got to keep clean when on the road!" he told her.

She laughed and sent him to get more water from the well. It was the hardest job and she was happy to be a little less sore when she went home.

A still breeze started up and the washerwoman informed Clancy that the clothes would be dry by the evening, except the wool cloaks, but that if they were hung by the fire overnight they too would be good.

Grudaire emerged from the cool darkness of the house into the watery sunlight. "What is going on?" He looked up at the billowing clouds and the heavy darkness to the east.

Degore related to him the activities of the city and he grew serious. "We have a boat of our own," he reminded them.

Basil, who had walked the washerwoman to the front doors, returned with good news. "I had your craft lashed to the trading vessel you followed in. She was too large to easily take out of the water."

Komodo George turned from where he was inspecting the bottom of his boat. "It will be a wild one tonight."

Basil agreed, but he had grim lines around his eyes. He graciously accepted Grudaire's thanks for looking out for their boat. Degore felt suspicious, but sure enough, when he went down to the harbour, the boat was tied up tight.

The afternoon grew progressively darker and Clancy, who seemed to be watching the clothes dry, had them safely off the line before the first drops fell. He folded some sheets for Mariella and hung up the woolen cloaks to finish drying.

"You are very helpful." Mariella rested by the fire her husband had just lit; she found she had a little less energy these days.

Komodo George came in as great drops began to fall. The door was closed to keep out the cold and make it possible to talk.

It rained hard for a time, and the wind picked up. The shutters rattled even though they were tightly fastened.

Mariella leaned against her husband who was speaking to her in quiet tones. Komodo George was leaning forwards to inspect his latest dragon drawing, making comments to Grudaire, who in turn was calmly gazing deep into the fire.

Clancy was acting strangely and Degore pulled him away to their room. Lighting the candle, he asked for an explanation.

Clancy furiously folded a shirt before responding. "Something is going on."

Degore's mind jumped to Basil's facial expression out there in the courtyard. "Can you elaborate?"

"It's nothing, but there is something." Clancy sat down on his sleeping mat. "They are so nice and welcoming to us—" he motioned towards the door which led downstairs to where the others were gathered "—but my gut keeps fighting my heart."

Degore nodded. "I thought something was up when Basil told us about our boat."

"I am glad you have felt something." Clancy was relieved. "I was wondering if I was going mad."

Degore was now sprawled out on his own mat. "But what are we to do? We don't know what they are up to, if anything, or what is going on or if Grudaire will suggest anything."

"And it's hard to outright accuse someone, especially such nice people, when you have nothing concrete," Clancy added.

"But what have you seen?" Degore pressed further.

"When Basil got those men on board to take his father's boat off, I thought they were sizing up the boat, and fair enough, but as other things happen I keep being reminded of it." Clancy smoothed his hair. "I have been down to the harbour from time to time and have seen how Basil handles his business with others, and I think it's very different to how he treats us."

"We did rescue his father," Degore reminded him, "surely a lot of kindness is due to that."

"Yes, and that haunts me when I think he is up to something," Clancy said. A strong gust of wind and pelting of rain made conversation impossible for a time.

Grudaire appeared and, using sign language to spare himself from shouting over the storm, asked them down for dinner. He was strangely subdued, and Degore could not tell if he was disturbed by the weather or had

something serious on his mind. The meal was quiet. Komodo George's head was in the clouds (a cloud of dragons, probably) and his son and daughter in law were pleasant but made no attempt at conversation.

Grudaire announced himself off to an early night, and Degore began to feel cooped up. He had been watching his hosts the whole meal but they had exhibited no suspicious behaviour.

It was a long, pent up evening. Clancy was content with his notebook by the fire and there was nothing for Degore to do, but somehow time passed and he was tucking himself into his sleeping mat. The wool cloaks had dried during the evening and Degore was glad of it, as the cold wind had chilled the house and a cotton sheet was not sufficient.

He slept in fits, periodically woken when the storm surged, but towards the morning it faded completely. He finally drifted off into restful slumber, and awoke to find the sun streaming through the open window. Clancy was deep in conversation with Grudaire.

They stopped as they noticed him sitting up.

"I am telling him about the situation," Clancy said, "and he reckons they are nice and there is nothing to worry about."

Grudaire nodded. "But I will keep my eyes peeled," he assured them.

Degore nodded back. "I want to go down and check on the boat."

A shuffling in the hallway distracted them all. They looked at each other and then Grudarie sprang up, silent as a tiger. He rushed the door open. Nothing.

After looking down the hallway he closed the door quietly. "I think you boys may be onto something after all. I have been busy with Komodo George and perhaps have been too trusting of our hosts."

Basil was out when they came down, and after a quick breakfast they started out for the harbour. Komodo George caught up with them when they were halfway down the street.

The evidence of the storm was everywhere: red tiles strewn about, broken foliage and snapped tree branches. Puddles sat here and there and people bustled about cleaning up the place.

The harbour water was smooth and calm, and a few fishing boats dotted the horizon as they arrived. Degore scanned the boats. Theirs was gone, as was the large vessel it was tied to.

Basil was nowhere to be seen and Komodo George hurried around the harbour looking for him. The usual bustle of the place was absent and only a few people were to be seen doing something or other to their boats.

Grudaire hailed a passing sea dog. "My good fellow, where are the large vessels with red and white sails?"

"They sailed yesterday afore the storm," he said. "If they gets a good few hours' sail south on the strong

winds, they can escape the worst of the storm, most of ten."

Grudaire thanked him and went over to the boys. "I think our boat may be gone forever."

They stood in silence, while Clancy clenched and unclenched his fists. "Let me have it out with that man!" he burst out.

Degore agreed, "We need answers."

Grudaire shook his head. "We cannot go on the offensive. Allow me to ask Basil politely about the boat." He looked at the boys. "Going in with anger and no proof is not a good strategy."

Before he could say any more, Komodo George came over, looking a bit troubled, but acting normally otherwise; he informed them that Basil had gone to another part of the city on business and would not be back till later that day. The party went back home in an unusual silence.

Clancy stood glowering over the harbour from the bedroom window. Degore watched him with concern. He also felt bad about the boat but was distracted by his friend's strong emotions.

Grudaire had gone somewhere with Komodo George and Mariella had her mother over and was chatting away downstairs.

After some time watching Clancy glare about the place, as if trying to start a forest fire, Degore tried to make conversation, but that was fruitless as Clancy did not respond. At last he heard Grudaire in the courtyard below and presently he came up to them.

"I have news," Grudaire said, regarding Clancy with concern. "I found Basil down at the harbour, and while he confessed to nothing it is very apparent to me that our boat did not break free and go sailing of its own accord. We are leaving this city tonight."

Clancy's lips curled back. "I will get a confession from that man!"

Grudaire suddenly changed from a kind old man to a powerful god. His presence seemed to fill the room. "You will not speak to Basil, nor anyone else in this city while you hold ill will towards them." Degore drew back, not in fright but awe. "We are Druids, followers of the light, and we will behave as such." His voice was not at a loud volume but Degore felt as if God Himself had spoken.

Clancy shrank back and his face went white. He clung to the window frame as if he had half a mind to clamber through.

The ferocity of Grudaire's powers faded as quickly as it had appeared and he looked kindly at the boys. "It is tough to lose the boat, and I should have been paying more attention to my surroundings, but we will not do anything foolish."

"But what about the boat?" Degore asked. "Will we just leave it?"

"You boys have a long life ahead of you. I do not know what choices you will make, but always remember, what goes around comes around." Grudaire looked around at their meagre possessions. "We will leave now. Pack the things."

In a few short minutes they were downstairs. They found Komodo George eating an orange by the well. "Leaving already?" he asked. "Time flies."

Mariella was straightening plants in their pots as they had been pushed around by the storm. She bustled over to them.

"Thank you for your hospitality." Grudaire placed coins in her hand. "You have been the kindest of hosts."

Clancy's eyes started from his head when he heard the money clink, but Degore grabbed his elbow.

They said their goodbyes and departed, their bundles on their back and Clancy with his longbow slung over one arm. They trudged up the hill away from the harbour.

In the hurry and surprise of leaving, Degore had forgotten to ask where they were going and how they would get there. Now he rushed to inquire.

"Komodo George introduced me to a merchant who regularly goes from here across the desert to Mor-Roinn Dragaintir, and he will take us with him." Grudaire motioned forwards with a staff the boys had never seen before that day.

"I did not know merchants went across the desert, and isn't that Dragaintir place dangerous?" Degore asked. "Freyja told me when I was little that Ritherhithe was not a friendly place."

"That is because they had just executed two druids," Grudaire said as they reached the top of the hill. They were only a short way from the golden statue, which stood in an olive grove.

Before them was a plain of humble farmers, their animals lean and crops struggling to grow beneath the shadow of the statue. Beyond that lay the desert. Behind them was the beautiful sea, the white city with red-tiled roofs and the salty sea breeze. Dark clouds were gathering again in the east. It would storm again that night.

"Ought we to go this way?" asked Degore worriedly. "Perhaps we could catch a boat south?" His brow knitted and he looked apprehensively into the distance.

"We will be fine," Grudaire said, "and after all, we will be with those who know their way across the desert. Take one last look at Claytonious, boys. Perhaps one day you will come here again..."

The three gazed over the city and the water. Grudaire with contentment, Degore with ideas of returning and Clancy with no good intent.

Then they turned and, without speaking, walked down the other side of the hill. They passed a few sheep

on the rocky outcrops and soon came upon a caravan. The tents were brightly painted and the camels decorated with bells.

A man hurried over, his long white robes swishing around him. His skin was dark and tanned and his blue eyes shone brightly in comparison. He greeted Grudaire and welcomed them into the caravan.

A chubby child ran out to him, her blonde curls bouncing as she toddled along. The man scooped her up. "My daughter Daisy, it's her first trip across the desert!" He looked proudly at her. A woman hurried over "There you are Daisy!" She wore fine pink cotton robes, and a veil almost hid her face. Fergal, as the boys later found out the man was called, gave a merry laugh and handed the baby over. "These young mothers are very protective," he said to Grudaire. "But come, we are about to take down the tent."

The caravan was made up of Fergal and his family, which numbered about ten people, including his elderly mother-in-law, her face lined and creased, and blind in one eye. But she was a merry old woman who lifted the mood wherever she went. There were a few other merchant families, though they were smaller in number, and the hired guards, all seven of them.

The camp was a bustle of commotion as they packed up. As the camels began to follow each other in a long line out of the campfire Fergal came over to them. They fell in line at the back of the caravan. There were about 20 camels in all. Fergal pointed out who owned what, but as the camels all looked the same Degore soon forgot. Grudaire walked briskly along, and it was soon obvious that his staff was not a fashion accessory.

"This is my 20th trip," Fergal beamed at Degore. Long ago he had given up addressing Clancy, who just looked passively around with an empty expression. "We usually start at dawn, but were delayed on some goods being delivered, so that is why you were able to join us."

"How long do camels travel for?" Degore inquired.

"They usually go from dawn to mid afternoon, then we set up camp." Fergal was enthused by this rare opportunity to share his knowledge on camels. "Sometimes we do not travel for a day or two if there is bad weather."

"Is it dangerous?" Degore couldn't help glancing at the armed guards. They wore dark clothes and had sharp swords at their sides, and in their hands, ever at the ready, were crossbows.

"More from wild animals than other people, but you gotta be careful when you come near cities and towns."

"Why do you bring your family?" Degore asked. He could not imagine Freyja spending all day travelling with him when he was small.

"I would miss them, these trips go on for weeks." Fergal rubbed his chin. "We have our whole house and

everything here," he motioned to the camels, "everything we could need. It's how I grew up, and my father, and his father..." He paused and thought for a bit. "It's the good life, you know: the quiet desert, your family all around, meeting new travellers." Fergal was decidedly content with his lot in life.

"What about your wife?" asked Grudaire. "Would a woman from a city choose this life?"

"Her mother—you've met her—ran a caravan for years, but was getting older when I met the family. I married and took over the operation. She is older now and needs looking after." Fergal pointed out a lone white figure ahead which was stationary as the camels walked by. "That is my father-in-law, and I think he wants to meet you."

They caught up with the elderly man, whose keen blue eyes assessed the group. Fergal introduced everyone and the old man walked quietly listening to the conversation for a time. Then he shifted his attention to Clancy, who stalked savagely a little behind the others.

Clancy forced a polite greeting when the old man addressed him. The man had a childlike air about him: he seemed unable to pick up on social signals, or perhaps ignored them on purpose, and seemed to be only interested in a few things that he personally was concerned about. He talked to Clancy, or more precisely at him, about desert birds, and which ones tasted the best. Usually anything with a culinary slant was of great interest to Clancy, but he was in a foul mood and at first it was all he could do to be polite to the man.

Slowly the old man's conversation worked at Clancy's bitterness and he soon began to ask the odd question here and there. The roasting techniques of various birds interested him. Was there a chance they would come across some of these birds on this trip?

The old man assured him that birds aplenty could be had. As they were still in the plains that stretched a few days' travel before the desert, they could find mal-leefowl, but the eggs were better than the flesh. Clancy was instructed to keep his eye open for a large mound as the birds laid eggs in the centre and kept them warm that way. The birds, he was informed, had a distinct black, brown, and grey mottled plumage on their backs, and they had grey heads and white breasts.

The old man cast questioning looks towards the longbow. "What do you do with that?" he finally asked.

"It is used for warfare more than hunting," Clancy said, "but I did take down a wallaby once."

The old man was intrigued, "What is a wallaby?"

"They are grey and they hop," Clancy said. "Face like a deer and a weird thick tail."

"Oh yes!" the old man exclaimed. "We came across one of them in the desert once! It was a strange creature." He looked intently at Clancy. "Good for eating?"

Clancy responded that it was quite good: mild and not overly gamey. "We need to capture another, I have only had it smoked because we had to leave in a hurry." Clancy lunged into an account of their travels. Degore joined them as the camel genetics that Fergal and Grudaire were so enthused over was too fiddly for him.

The old man was fascinated by their journey, for he had spent his whole life criss-crossing the desert and foreign places intrigued him. Many people from all over the world had come across their humble caravan as it crossed the desert.

"Why do you trade across the desert when ships can travel faster from Claytonious to Rotherhithe?" Grudaire and Fergal had exhausted the topic of camels.

"We can offer better prices than the floating merchants. Us camel traders are born in the desert and are not citizens of Claytonious, so we avoid taxes by spending most of our time out in the desert." Fergal pointed to a thin strip of green appearing up ahead. "That is the river that divides them from the desert."

"How close are we?"

"We will reach it the day after tomorrow," Fergal said. "Fun fact: because us traders are so rare, we can enter Mor-Roinn Dragaintir without paying any tax, so we make a good living this way."

Grudaire nodded "A tax-free living, my favourite."

The sun was low in the sky when the last camel arrived in the spot chosen for the camp. The boys got their first lessons in setting up a tent. Degore had a run in with a scorpion; the desert ones were bigger than those back at the abbey and he ended up grinding it into the sand with the hilt of his sword. The old man found it funny. He told the boys his father had liked to eat them.

The night set in and the cold was chilling. The fires crackled and people moved around chatting. The guards had fires set up at vantage points around the camp and were preparing to keep guard.

As he munched on a slice of bread, Degore enquired of Fergal what they were expecting to attack the camp that night.

"Big cats and wild dogs mostly," Fergal said, "and I have to go around the camp in the morning and check that snakes have not crawled into the tent to keep warm." The man's attitude towards the dangerous animals was very casual.

The stars were numerous and brilliant. Degore fell asleep trying to count them all as he lay, wrapped in his wool cloak, by the fire.

He awoke to Clancy shaking him. The sun was not over the horizon yet. "It's too early," he protested, the cold pressing down on him.

Fergal's mother in law, Aoife, handed him a dish of soup. "Eat up, we have a long day ahead."

The sun was just peeping over the horizon as the first camel grunted out of the camp. Degore had been

roped into helping herd the cows and sheep ahead and to the left of the caravan. He was working with Fergal's younger brother, Callum, a stout lad with dark hair and blue eyes like Fergal's.

The river glittered and sparkled ahead as the caravan pulled up for the night. Degore suggested to Callum that they head down and check it out, and also enquired why they were camping so far away from the bank.

Callum held him back. "There are spirits down there," he said soberly. "We will cross early on the morrow and hope for a good crossing."

He would not share more and instead busied himself herding the animals into the centre of the ring of tents. The white tents were decorated with bright colours in geometric prints around the tops of the walls and around the cheerfully painted flaps, and usually they were closely pitched, but had their doors opening away from each other to give families their own space. This time, however, they were in a tight ring around the animals. All the guards were up and alert with their weapons held close, and the men of the caravan, who normally slept through the cold nights in their warm beds, showed no sign of joining their families after the strangely subdued meal was over and the women and children headed into their tents.

Clancy sensed the mood and perked up. He busily counted his arrows and twanged his bow. One particularly rugged man was sharpening his blade beside Clancy and the two were deep in conversation. Degore crept closer to hear.

"There's not just the spirits to be concerned about, but also the great roamer." The man felt his blade. "In these parts they both grow up to 20 feet long."

"What are they?!" Clancy asked in awe.

"Massive lizards." The man inspected one of Clancy's arrows "I hope you are a good shot, because they are fast."

"The river is salt water, so the salties are in there," Degore piped up. "That's what Fergal said, anyway."

The man nodded. "But they stay in the water, it's their land-dwelling cousins we are not so keen on. But we do not expect to see the great roamers around here: they tend to be on the other side of the river and further to the south, as they prefer open grassland to this desert or those marshes." He motioned across to the outline of trees that stood dark against the last glint of faded orange sky.

The guard pricked his ears and looked towards the south. "I reckon that may be a spirit there."

"What sound did you hear?" asked Clancy eagerly.

"They make a snoring sound," the guard said quickly and motioned to the boys to be quiet. After straining his ears for some time and making eye contact with Fergal who had appeared in a gap between the tents, he turned back to the boys. "It's far away, so we are fine for now."

Degore shivered, but his eyes shone. "Do you think it will come by tonight?"

The guard chuckled, "I do hope not," but the grin on his face betrayed his true feelings. He looked lovingly down at his claymore.

"Why do all of you have different styles of swords?" Clancy enquired. "I recognise your sword here but that big knife that Fergal had is not one I have seen before."

"We travel between two large trading ports and so come upon a large range of things to choose from." The guard stood amongst the sheep and waved his sword around above their heads.

A loud hissing sound startled Degore, and he leapt up. The sheep pushed against the tents and a sheepdog gave a startled bark.

The guard darted out of the circle of tents with the boys hot at his heels. Fires had been lit around the tents, and from the gloom beyond a huge lizard moved slowly, its tongue flicking back and forth. In the flickering light the men could at last see the huge 16-foot long animal. It was a reddish grey colour and had a crest over its nose. The creature yawned and Degore noticed its teeth were angled backwards. The creature seemed happy to be at a distance, it just walked back and forth.

A snorting, bellowing sound came from the other side of the tents and Fergal groaned ferociously. "Why are they all coming at once!" Frustration tinged his voice. The guards had gathered around Clancy with their backs to the tents. Clancy stood ready to draw his bow.

Fergal and some other men hurried in the direction of the new noise, and Degore hurried after them. He rounded the tent in excitement and trepidation. But the animal on the other side horrified him. It was a whole three feet longer than the lizard, and looked like an enormous saltie that had legs far longer than your average crocodile's. It had a more actively aggressive style, unlike the cold hostility on the other side.

The animals appeared to be communicating with each other, and they began to move towards each other around the tents. They stayed beyond the fires on the edge of the darkness. The two groups of men were soon together again.

"Just as well they are more interested in each other," the guard with the claymore said, "or we would have real trouble on our hands."

Fergal glanced over the men. "When they fight there will be trouble. I'm not having them crash into the

tents." The cry of a baby was heard and Fergal straightened up. "Well, boys," he said, "we have had many great journeys through the desert, and avoided trouble for many years." The animals' hissing rose above his voice for a moment as they began to circle each other. "I hope to see you all on the other side." He shared a meaningful look with the claymore guard.

"The roamer is the more dangerous," the guard said, motioning towards the lizard. "They have poisonous saliva."

The animals lunged for each other. The half-ton of lizard was hissing loudly. As its enormous mouth opened, the huge teeth glinted in the light. The long-legged Spirit rushed forwards; it lumbered a little, and looked only half the weight of the roamer despite being longer. Its awful snorting, bellowing sound was worse close up, and despite not being the target of the aggression Degore felt his hair stand on end, lifting his cap.

The animals smacked into each other, with the roamer getting a good grip on the front shoulder of the spirit. The tussle scattered the dust and put out one fire as the animals moved closer to the tents.

Degore found himself shoved behind Clancy, who trembled a little at the terrible sounds and huge aggressive bodies.

"I have to kill one," Clancy was saying, "but I need them to stay still, I cannot hold the bow at full length for long!"

A spray of soil fell upon the group and Fergal yelled out that it had to be now. The roamer had damaged the front leg of the spirit and it was fighting desperately for its life. Fergal slashed at the side of the spirit with his sword but the thick leather made the blade bounce right off. The roamer turned quickly and smacked over a guard, who was crushed beneath the animal as it lurched forward.

Grudaire appeared on the scene with a spear. He hurled it with expert force towards the roamer. It missed and went into the shoulder of the spirit which was hanging open. The animal screamed as it fell.

The roamer, having claimed the victory for itself, turned to the humans to have a rewarding feast. The huge, blood-covered teeth were barely a yard from them when Clancy drew his bow. The arrow shot straight down the huge black hole that was the roamer's throat.

The animal continued onwards, apparently untroubled by this attack, and the guard stepped forward with his claymore in his grasp. Man and lizard stared deep into each other's eyes. Degore was very grateful that the guard was the same species as him, as he found his eyes to be no less cold or primal than the roamer's.

The lizard stopped suddenly, and tried to cough. The guard was beside it in a second and drove the claymore deep into the roamer's neck. The animal twisted

its body and sent the guard flying. The guard took his sword with him and blood gushed from the wound. The animal hissed savagely, struggling on the sand.

Suddenly all was quiet. The roamer lay still, the men stood or lay about on the sand, and there was no sound or movement from the tents behind them.

Fergal was the first to move. He stepped forward cautiously and hacked the head off the roamer. The guard got up, looking a bit knocked about, and stumbled over to the spirit.

The spirit appeared to be dead but when he got close it lifted its head and tried to move towards him. Fergal was upon the animal in an instant and soon it lay still, never to move again.

The guard fell to the ground and Fergal called Degore over. "I want you to take him inside and take care of him until you are relieved of your duties."

Degore nodded and knelt down beside the guard. He had not yet completed his whole medical training, but felt that as long as the man did not have a broken skull he would be fine with caring for him. He lifted up the unconscious body and slung it over his shoulders.

He carefully carried the man around the roamer's corpse and towards the tents, not noticing the looks of admiration and surprise at his strength. Callum, who was standing by the gap in the tents, ushered him in and helped him lay the man down in the guards' tent. Carefully Degore removed the man's armour and protective clothing and bathed his wounds. Callum appeared sporadically to help him out and offered to bring him anything he wanted. The guard was flitting in and out of consciousness and Degore sat calmly by him watching his condition.

At one stage he left Callum in charge and went out to find Grudaire. The space in front of the tents now was filled with many scared animals. Some even had bags over their heads to keep them calm. There was a hum of activity and noise as children and wives rejoiced at having their husbands and fathers survive yet another dangerous night.

Grudaire was out with Fergal. They were bent down examining the body of the crushed guard. Grudaire noticed him and came over quickly.

Degore had inquiries as to the condition of his patient and what herbs to administer. The man had no serious physical injuries but was acting delirious.

Grudaire suggested a herb to keep any fever at bay and said he would be by shortly, and as Degore went away he got the feeling there was something going on. Fergal was acting strangely, and Grudaire looking extra serious.

The guard was sitting up and inspecting the bent blade of his claymore by sunup the next day.

The industrious caravaners were packing their tents up with extra speed that morning. "Why are you going? Couldn't you stay a day to recover?" Clancy was asking Callum as the three boys started out from the campsite with the animals.

Callum motioned to the dead carcasses. "Those things can be smelt for miles, we cannot move them so we must go."

Degore looked back at the half-ton roamer,

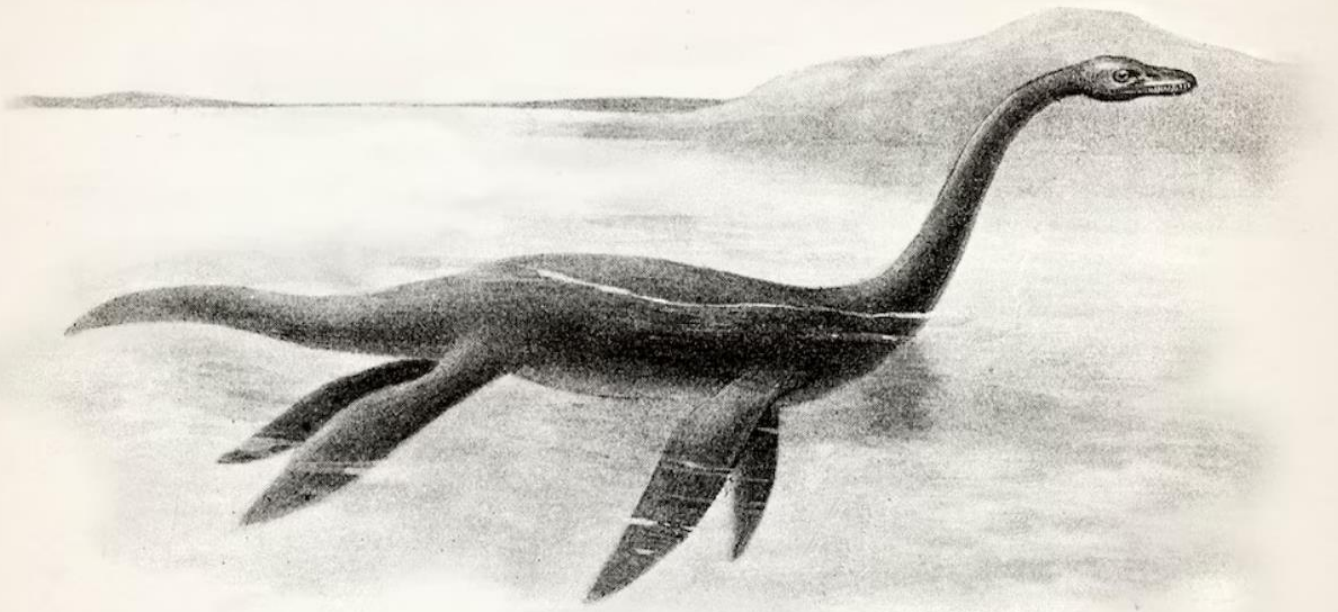
which could still be seen despite their distance from it. "I hope I never see one of them again."

Clancy, back to his old self again, patted a sheep lovingly. "As long as you stay near me and my longbow, you will be fine."

Callum laughed, "But seriously, you are a hero for helping bring down the roamer."

Degore clapped Clancy on the back. "You are a great person to have on an adventure."





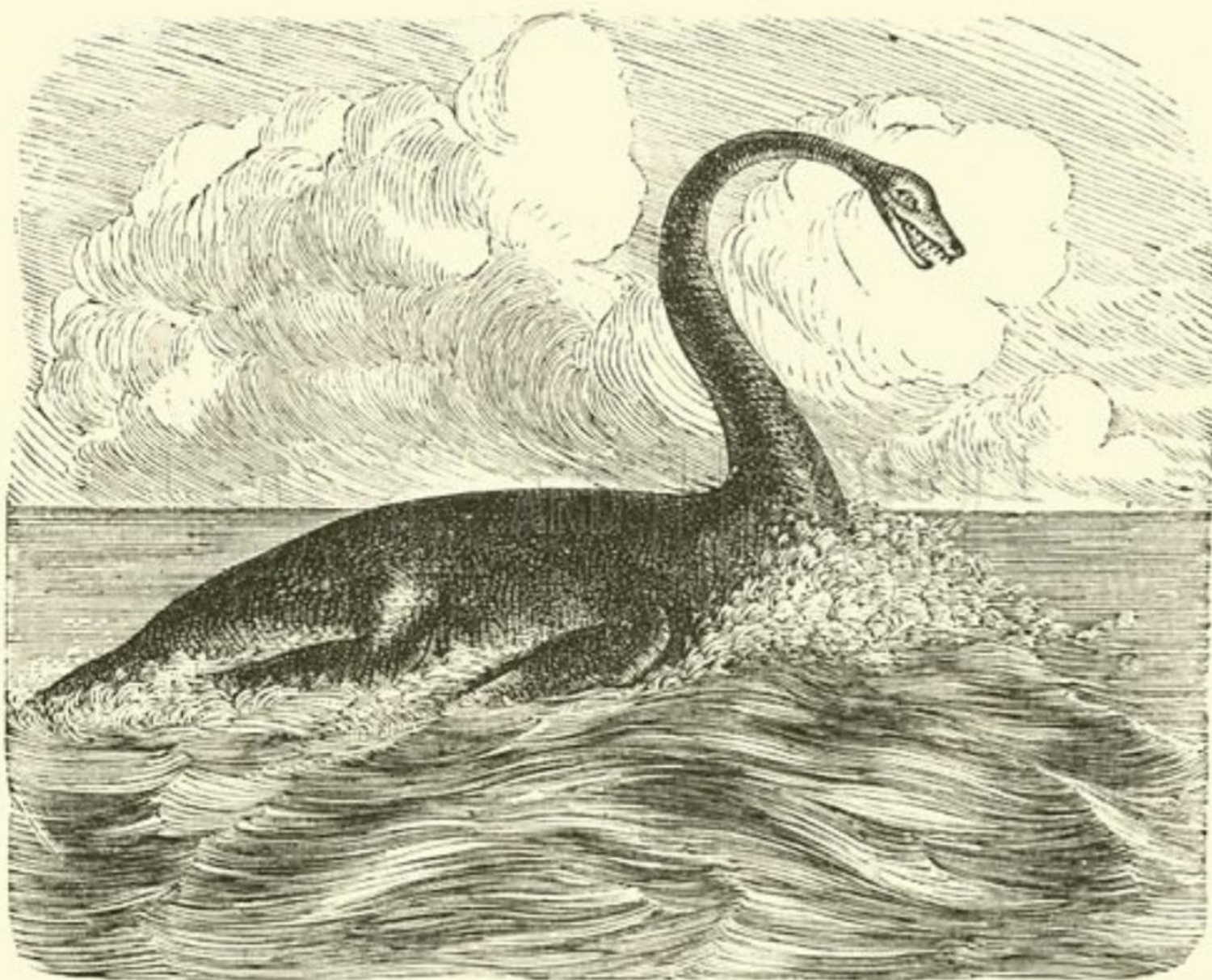
NESSIE

The Legend of Nessie

The earliest report of a monster in the vicinity of Loch Ness appears in the *Life of St. Columba* by Adomnán, written in the 7th century AD. According to Adomnán, writing about a century after the events described, Irish monk Saint Columba was staying in the land of the Picts with his companions when he encountered local residents burying a man by the River Ness. They explained that the man was swimming in the river when he was attacked by a "water beast" that mauled him and dragged him underwater despite their attempts to rescue him by boat. Columba sent a follower, Luigne moccu Min, to swim across the river. The beast approached him, but Columba made the sign of the cross and said: "Go no further. Do not touch the man. Go back at once." The creature stopped as if it had been "pulled back with ropes" and fled, and Columba's men and the Picts gave thanks for what they perceived as a miracle. Believers in the monster point to this story, set in the River Ness rather than the loch itself, as evidence for the creature's existence as early as the 6th century.

Skeptics question the narrative's reliability, noting that water-beast stories were extremely common in medieval hagiographies, and Adomnán's tale probably recycles a common motif attached to a local landmark. According to skeptics, Adomnán's story may be independent of the modern Loch Ness Monster legend and became attached to it by believers seeking to bolster their claims. Ronald Binns considers that this is the most serious of various alleged early sightings of the monster, but all other claimed sightings before 1933 are dubious and do not prove a monster tradition before that date. Christopher Cairney uses a specific historical and cultural analysis of Adomnán to separate Adomnán's story about St. Columba from the modern myth of the Loch Ness Monster, but finds an earlier and culturally significant use of Celtic "water beast" folklore along the way. In doing so he also discredits any strong connection between kelpies or water-horses and the modern "media-augmented" creation of the Loch Ness Monster. He also concludes that the story of Saint Columba may have been impacted by earlier Irish myths about the Caoránach and an Oilliphéist.

The Plesiosaurus, restored. Illustration for *Life in the Primeval World* by WH Davenport Adams (Nelson, 1872).



THE PLESIOSAURUS, RESTORED.

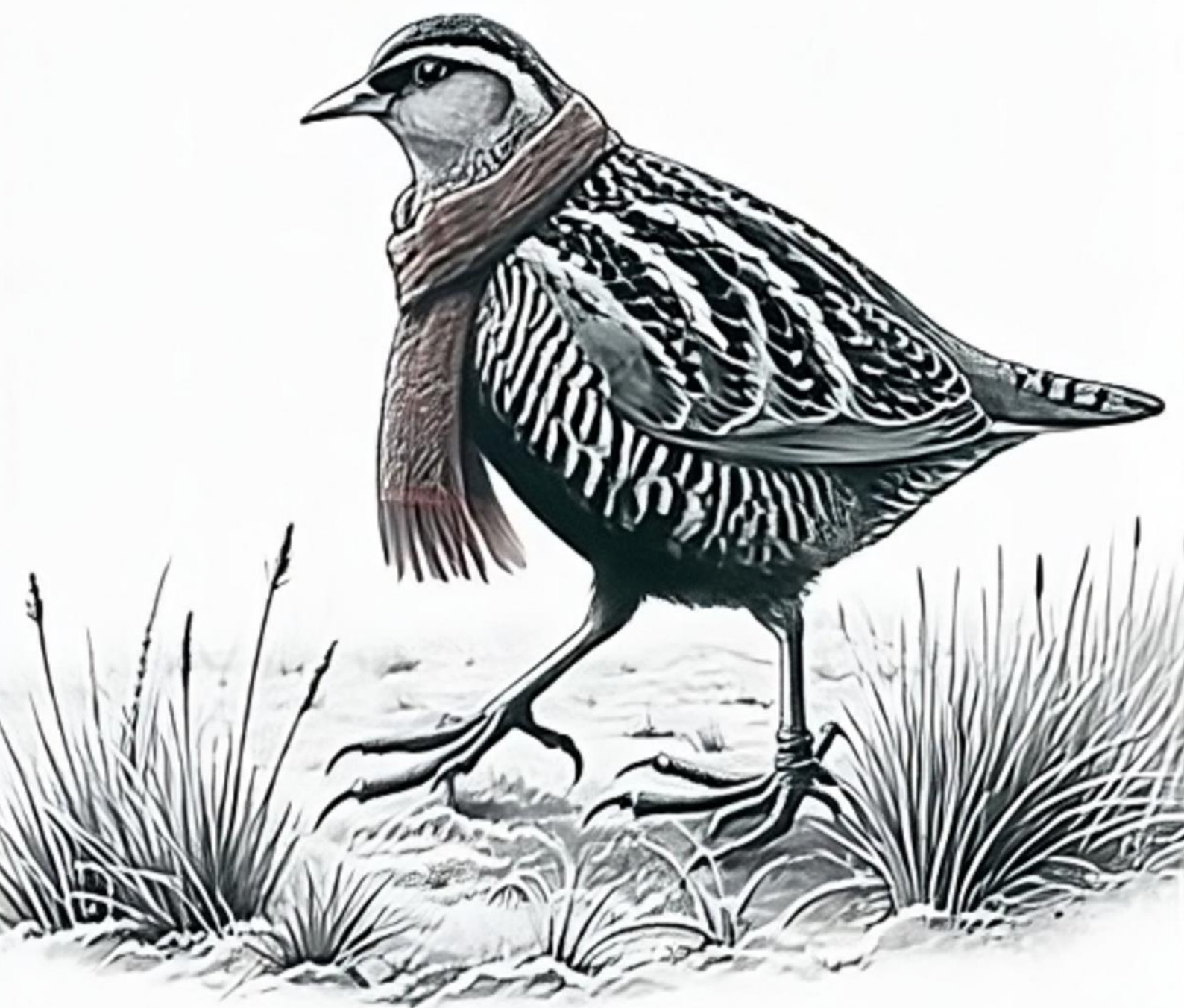
Song from She Stoops to Conquer

by Oliver Goldsmith

Let schoolmasters puzzle their brain
With grammar, and nonsense, and learning,
Good liquor, I stoutly maintain,
Gives GENUS a better discerning.
Let them brag of their heathenish gods,
Their Lethes, their Styxes, and Stygians,
Their Quis, and their Quaes, and their Quods,
They're all but a parcel of Pigeons.
Toroddle, toroddle, toroll.

When methodist preachers come down,
A-preaching that drinking is sinful,
I'll wager the rascals a crown,
They always preach best with a skinful.
But when you come down with your pence,
For a slice of their scurvy religion,
I'll leave it to all men of sense,
But you, my good friend, are the Pigeon.
Toroddle, toroddle, toroll.

Then come, put the jorum about,
And let us be merry and clever,
Our hearts and our liquors are stout,
Here's the Three Jolly Pigeons for ever.
Let some cry up woodcock or hare,
Your bustards, your ducks, and your widgeons;
But of all the GAY birds in the air,
Here's a health to the Three Jolly Pigeons.
Toroddle, toroddle, toroll.



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