

CORN CRAKE



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ISSUE 13

Splendid Badger

AR Duncan

Ben Pook

AR Green

Sam Rake

Thomas Hardy

The Chemist

The Perilous Bridge

Nathan CJ Hood

NESTING IN THE OAK OF
ENGLISH LITERATURE

Nathan Hood hosts The Merry Corncrakes Podcast

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“Not the bee upon the blossom,
In the pride o' sunny noon;
Not the little sporting fairy,
All beneath the simmer moon;
Not the poet, in the moment
Fancy lightens in his e'e,
Kens the pleasure, feels the rapture,
That thy presence gi'es to me.”
— Robert Burns

Editor's Note



Greetings and Salutations from all at the Corncrake (me)! Welcome to an extra special edition of your favourite periodical! This issue marks one year since the first issue was launched into outer space, and now, my fellow Martians, here are lots more delectable pages for you to feverishly flip through.

The Corncrake has come a long way since those early days and we celebrate this by using the same artist to do the cover: Juniper Tree is back again, this time to illustrate Nathan CJ Hood's *The Perilous Bridge*.

We are joined by The Chemist, a newcomer to our birdcage, with an essay *The One Ring and The Path of Enlightenment*. Another new writer is Sam Rake, with *Amidst the Mist and Dew*. Splendid Badger is a poet, though he doesn't know it. He joins us with *A Dance for Eternity*.

The art interview is with Ben Pook, prolific young chap who specialises in action-packed historical military scenes.

Thomas Hardy is a name we should all know, if we like depressing poetry, and two of his finest are included, along with an English fairy tale by Joseph Jacobs, and Nathan CJ Hood has written an introduction to *The Kiss of Fate*, a classic tale by Rider Haggard. Don't miss our gripping serials, AR Green's *Forging the Man*, and AR Duncan's *Eagles Flight*

Join Nathan CJ Hood on the Merry Corncrakes podcast with Liquid Swan, T Meadows, and myself, Shieldmaiden, for a celebratory stream for the anniversary of the Corncrake.

Call of the Shieldmaiden

Editor-in-Chief

Twitter @CorncrakeMag



Dates of Importance

St. David's Day is celebrated on **March 1st** each year, primarily in Wales, where he is patron saint. There is no official recognition of St. David's Day as a holiday in England. However, people of Welsh origin in England may still celebrate the day by wearing traditional Welsh costumes, pinning daffodils or leeks to their clothes, and attending special church services or parades.

Shrove Tuesday (March 4), also known as Pancake Day, is a traditional Christian celebration in England that marks the day before Ash Wednesday, which starts the period of Lent. Historically, Shrove Tuesday was the last opportunity to indulge in rich foods like eggs, butter, sugar, and fats before the fasting period of Lent began. In England, the day is celebrated with various customs and traditions. One of the most popular traditions is the pancake race, where participants race while flipping pancakes in frying pans. This tradition is believed to have originated in Olney, Buckinghamshire, in 1445. Pancake races are now held in many towns and cities across the country. Other traditions include pancake tossing competitions, where people compete to see who can toss the pancake the highest or catch it the most times without it falling. Pancake Day is also a time for families and communities to come together to cook and eat pancakes with various toppings, such as lemon and sugar, maple syrup, or chocolate sauce. In some parts of England, Shrove Tuesday is also marked by other activities, such as the "Hurling of the Silver Ball" in St Columb, Cornwall, and the Royal Shrovetide Football match in Ashbourne, Derbyshire. Shrove Tuesday falls 47 days before Easter and always occurs on a Tuesday, with the date varying each year between February 3 and March 9.

Ash Wednesday is observed in England as a holy day of prayer and fasting, marking the beginning of the six weeks of Lent before Easter. In 2025, Ash Wednesday falls on **March 5th**. In the Anglican Church, the traditional imposition of ashes was discontinued after the Protestant Reformation, but it has been reintroduced in recent times. The ashes are traditionally imposed on the forehead with the words "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return".

Lent is a solemn Christian religious observance in the liturgical year that prepares believers for Easter. In England, Lent **begins on Ash Wednesday and ends approximately six weeks later, usually concluding on Holy Saturday or Maundy Thursday**, depending on the denomination. During Lent, many Christians in England fast, give up certain luxuries, and engage in acts of charity and prayer to reflect Jesus's 40-day fast in the desert and his sacrifice. Lent is a time for self-denial and spiritual growth, often involving giving up treats or luxuries and adding spiritual disciplines such as reading a daily devotional or praying through a Lenten calendar.

St. Gregory the Great is relevant to England. He is known for sending a group of monks, including Augustine of Canterbury, on a mission to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxons to Christianity in 596. This mission is often referred to as the Gregorian mission and was successful in establishing Christianity in England. St. Gregory is also revered in England as the apostle of the land and the source of the nation's conversion. Additionally, St. Gregory's Parish Church in Sudbury, Suffolk, is an Anglican Church that continues to serve the local community. His day is the **12th March**.

In England, **St Patrick's Day** is not a public holiday, so schools, stores, and businesses operate as usual on **March 17th**. However, many people still celebrate Irish culture by wearing green, attending Irish-themed events, and visiting pubs that offer special activities. Some towns and cities with large Irish populations organize parades and other large-scale events. For example, London, which has a significant Irish community, hosts a parade and various cultural events.

The **spring equinox (20 March)** is celebrated in England, particularly at Stonehenge, where pagans, druids, and nature lovers gather to mark the occasion. This celebration is one of the eight festivals of the Wheel of the Year in Wiccan and neo-pagan traditions, often referred to as Ostara. The spring equinox heralds the beginning of spring in the Northern Hemisphere and is associated with themes of fertility, creativity, and renewal.

Lady Day (25 March) was an important day in the Regency calendar, marking the Feast of the Annunciation and the start of the Christian New Year in the past, though by the Regency era, it was the first of the English quarter days. It was significant for various reasons, including the commencement of leases, payment of rents and debts, hiring of servants, and the beginning of the plucking season for goose feathers. In Regency England, if one wished to rent a house in London for the social season, the deal had to be finalized by Lady Day to ensure a suitable residence.

The Annunciation is the event in Christianity where the angel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive and bear a son, Jesus, who would be the Son of God and the Christian Messiah. This event marks the Incarnation, the moment when Jesus took on human form. According to the Gospel of Luke, the Annunciation occurred in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist. Mary's willing consent to this divine plan was essential to the Incarnation and the redemption of the world. The Feast of the Annunciation is celebrated on **March 25**, nine months before Christmas, and is one of the principal feasts of the Christian church.

Mothering Sunday is celebrated in England on the fourth Sunday of Lent, which falls on **March 30**. Historically, it was a day when people would visit their local mother church, typically the cathedral in their area, or the church where they were baptized. This tradition dates back to the Middle Ages, when children who had moved away from their hometowns were allowed to return to visit their mothers and the church where they were baptized. In modern times, Mothering Sunday has evolved into a day to honor mothers and other mother figures, such as grandmothers, stepmothers, and mothers-in-law.²⁴ People often give presents, flowers, and homemade cards to their mothers. Common gifts include cakes, flowers, chocolates, jewelry, and luxurious clothing. Simnel cake is a traditional confection associated with both Mothering Sunday and Easter. The day is not a public holiday, and businesses generally follow regular Sunday opening hours. However, many people take the opportunity to treat their mothers to brunch, lunch, or high tea in a cafe, restaurant, or hotel. In urban settings, churches often supply violets for children to present to their mothers on this day. While Mothering Sunday is traditionally observed on the fourth Sunday of Lent, the term "Mother's Day" has gained popularity due to American influence, although it retains its original religious meaning in the United Kingdom.



Saint Wite

Saint Wite (pronounced Wee-ta) was a 9th-century Saxon holy woman from Dorset who was killed by marauding Danes. She is the patron saint of Dorset and her feast day is on 1 June, also celebrated as Dorset Day. Wite is an Old English word with no Latin connections.

The chroniclers William of Worcester and John Gerard recorded the history of Saint Wite in the 15th and 16th centuries. Thomas More recorded the custom of offering cakes or cheese to the saint on her feast day. Local oral tradition recounts that Saint Wite lived as a hermit on secluded cliffs in prayer and solitude. She maintained fires as beacons to guide sailors. She was killed by Danish Vikings during a 9th-century raid on Charmouth, which corroborates with a landing at Charmouth of around 15,000 Vikings and the battle of Chardown Hill in 831AD.

Other theories have suggested that Saint Wite was actually the 4th century martyr Saint Candida who was killed in Carthage or the 6th-century Breton Saint Gwen Teirbron. Sabine Baring-Gould suggested that she was the fifth-century Breton Saint Blanche.

The shrine containing her relics is located in the north transept of the parish Church of St Candida and Holy Cross in Whitchurch Canonicorum, in the Marshwood Vale between Bridport and Lyme Regis, Dorset. During the medieval period, her shrine became one of England's most visited pilgrimage sites. The 13th century base of the limestone and marble shrine has three oval openings into which were placed diseased limbs or articles belonging to the sick. They would then pray for her intercession. There were separate openings in the outside wall for people afflicted with leprosy.

Her shrine escaped desecration during the 16th century Reformation in England, which prohibited the veneration of saints. Holy Cross and St. Candida Church is one of two churches in England that still holds the bones of a saint, the other survivor is that of the King and Saint Edward the Confessor in Westminster Abbey, London.

In 1900, a crack developed in her tomb. It was opened and was found to hold a lead casket containing the bones of a small woman about 40 years old. On the casket was the Latin inscription "HIC-REQESCT-RELIQE-SCE-WITE" ("Here lie the remains of St Wite"). It was then restored.

There is a holy well associated with Saint Wite at Morcombelake nearby. It was first documented in 1630 and is currently managed by the National Trust.

Saint Wite's Cross on the flag of Dorset

Saint Wite is the patron saint of the county of Dorset and her feast day is 1 June, which is also celebrated as Dorset Day. In 2008, Dorset County Council organised a design competition and vote to adopt a Flag of Dorset. Saint Wite's Cross, with the colours of gold representing the Wessex dragon and red representing a Dorset military regiment. The flag has been registered at the Flag Institute and added to their UK Flags Register.



The shrine of Saint Wite, note the three oval holes below the tomb where people have posted letters of request and thanks (Image: Matthew Lambley / Alamy Stock Photo)

Dorset

Dorset is a Wessex county of chalk downs, a charming coast and the home of the stately and rural life lovingly captured in the novels of Thomas Hardy, a Dorset man, and before him by the Rev. William Barnes. The downs reach a height of over 900 feet in the west. The limestone cliffs of the Dorset coast are rich in nature and in other ways; Purbeck marble, Portland stone, and from the cliffs of Lyme Regis innumerable dinosaur fossils. Another curiosity of this coast is Chesil Beach, a unique pebble bank which runs some eight miles to the Isle of Portland, projecting into the English Channel south from Weymouth. Poole Harbour, a great island-studded inlet between Purbeck and the town of Poole, is one of the largest natural harbours in the world. Dorchester is a market town. The rest of the county is a landscape of farmland and villages with smaller historic towns.

Main Towns: Dorchester, Abbotsbury, Bridport, Dorchester, Gillingham, Lyme Regis, Poole, Portland, Shaftesbury, Sherborne, Herbourne, Swanage, Weymouth, Wimborne Minster.

Main Rivers: Axe, Frome, Stour.

Highlights: Brownsea Island; Cerne Abbas Giant; Chesil Beach and Portland Bill; Durdle Door; Lulworth Cove; Maiden Castle.

Highest Point: Lewesdon Hill, 915 feet.

County Flower: Dorset Heath

The Dorset flag is made of three colours - red (pantone 186), white and gold (pantone 116).

During the Duke of Monmouth' uprising in 1685, the Dorset militia wore red coats with yellow facings. The drummers had this reversed with yellow coats and red facings.

The three colours are also found in the coat of arms of the Sherborne Abbey.

During spring, much of rural Dorset grows rapeseed, covering the county in fields of yellow.

The Dorset militia and regiment used the colours gold, red and green.

The flag has also been linked to the name of Saint Wite, a female Dorset saint who is buried at Whitchurch Canonorum. An Anglo-Saxon holy woman, she is thought to have been martyred by invading Viking "Danes" in the 9th century. It has been variously known as "The Dorset Cross", "St Wite's Cross" or simply "The Dorset Flag". David White himself expressed a preference for "The Dorset Cross" for purposes of free interpretation, yet also abided by St. Wite's attachment to the flag as a symbol of "all that is unchanging... [and] down-to-earth" in Dorset's people and identity.



The Perilous Bridge

Nathan CJ Hood



Drustan surveyed the route ahead. Large oak planks stretched from the gorse covered banks into the misty heart of the loch, wide enough for three men. Its path ran straight as it gradually rose to a height of fifteen feet above the gently lapping grey waters below, held up by finely carved rounded logs and set into the bed of the loch. Age had taken its toll, as the causeway was replete with broken and missing boards, its posts bent one way or another. He who walked upon it had to watch his step, for with no guardrails a misplaced step would send a traveller hurtling through one of the many gaping holes.

Peering through a large gap where multiple planks were missing, a short burst of air exhaled from Drustan's large but handsome nose as his gaze fell upon what lay underneath the bridge. Jagged spikes, made of cold iron, broke the surface of the loch. The sharp, hungry teeth followed the underside of the walkway in row upon row, though placed irregularly. Some way ahead, Drustan was surprised to see the oozing remains of a fresh corpse pinned by the metal shafts. Very few knew the whereabouts of this place, and even fewer had tried to cross this bridge. Limply it lolled, wave and wind unable to dislodge the bloody flesh broken by sharp metal. Scarlet mingled with dull grey, bronze tendrils spreading from their source of origination as the life of the man seeped away into the depths below.

Taut sinews quivered as strength coursed through his body and mind. Breathing deeply and slowly, Drustan laid a foot onto the walkway. Toe, ball and heel tested themselves gently upon the oak plank. It did not give. Nor did it creak, though that may have been due to the warrior's lightness of foot rather than the plank's stability. He began to plant his white leather boot more firmly as he judged whether it would hold his weight, though retaining a readiness to leap backwards should it fail him. Eventually his foot with fullness descended onto the long-trampled board. Relief. The challenge of the first step had been overcome.

Toe, ball and heel. Toe, ball and heel. So Drustan crept his way along the perilous causeway. He could hear his heart thumping in the silence of the vale. There was no bird song in that pale gloom. It was a dead place, its stillness only ruptured by the occasional groan of wooden boards unused to holding a man on their backs. But Drustan made them do so, so long as they could bare him. He had to reach the endpoint of the walkway, though where that was he could not say, for the bridge seemed to stretch for mile upon mile into the mist.

Toe, ball and heel. Toe, ball and heel. Toe, ball and... wait. Here is a plank that is bending. It yelps in pain. Withdraw the foot. Find another route. Toe, ball and heel. Toe, ball and heel.

One hour passed; a second followed. Drustan dared not move too fast, lest his step be fatal. He was a tall man compared to most. He wrapped a lean muscularity in an unblemished woollen tunic dyed orange lined with threads of yellow. Upon his shoulders he bore an immaculate woollen cloak, six feet in length, that was blindingly white in colour and clasped at the neck by a broach in the shape of a golden star. Around his waist was a silver belt carrying a short, curved dagger,

the hilt of which was encrusted with orange gemstones. His mahogany hair was wild, though drawn into several buns proceeding down the midpoint of his head. Sapphire eyes sparkled in a hard, clean-shaven face decorated with tight lips and a strong jaw tense with the clenching of teeth.

Still further the causeway carried on, rising to a height of thirty feet above the icy waters below. The fog grew thicker and thicker until Drustan could barely see the planks in front of his feet. Legs ached with tension, concentration flagged, doubts rose. All he could trust was the rhythmic pattern that had seen him thus far.

Toe, ball and heel. Toe, ball and heel. Toe, ball and...
CRACK!

Drustan cried out as his right foot plunged forward through the broken board. He tried to pull back, but it was too late. The downward momentum of his leg carried the rest of his body through the walkway. Large splinters raked his clothes as he hurtled through. Face first he swung, catching a glimpse of an iron shaft directly beneath him. Onwards it came, greedily rushing to meet him.

Time seemed to stop as Drustan thought of Iseult. She was the one he loved, the one he was going to rescue, the lady who had saved his soul. He pictured her in his mind's eye. Dark golden locks flowed down over her snow-white skin. Piercing lapis lazuli eyes stared out from her sharp featured face. A silver band of twisted metal cords circled her neck. Flowers were in her hair and round her wrists, and her slender body was clothed in a silken gown of pink and blue. He adored that look of hers, imperious with a hint of mischief. In his mind, her lips parted into a great smile, a ray of sunshine that trickled through Drustan. That smile, so full of joy, quietened his inward tempest. The world melted around him. Nothing else mattered, nothing else existed to him in that moment, but the beautiful bursting smile beheld by his mind.

With a sudden jolt, Drustan's fall was halted. His body swung round below him until his feet were directly beneath his head as the broach dug deep into his windpipe.

Can't breathe.

He looked up. The white cloak he bore was torn, but a portion had become caught on the fractured beam above. It was straining against the weight it now bore.

Can't breathe. Can't breathe.

Drustan's legs began to twitch and kick, his arms rising up to the clasp on his neck. Pressure began to flood his head. The world around seemed to grow more distant and consumed by his need to breathe. Fingers groped and flailed as he writhed in desperation.

Can't breathe. Can't breathe. Can't. Can't. C...

Drustan's fingers flicked open the broach. At once he fell, released from the cord that was strangling him. Sweet vitality rushed into him as he inhaled in a flurry of gasps. Renewed in spirit, he launched an arm upwards and grabbed. Nails dug into wool, jerking Drustan to a stop once more. Dangling below the walkway and above the spike, he took a moment to still his mind and body.

A deep breath in, a deep breath out.

The ringing in his ears faded away; violent pumping in his chest subsided. With the effects of his near-death dissolving, he could now consider the challenge ahead of him.

“Ooh ooh, hee hee, you’re in quite the pick, pick, pickle.”

Drustan whipped his head up towards the source of the small, lax voice. Peering through the hole left by the warrior’s fall perched a strange creature. About the size of a house cat, it had a prolonged torso bearing spindly arms and legs. Bright blue fur, tangled and matted, covered its jet-black skin, revealed on its face and palms. Its hindmost feet were clawed like a hawk’s, while it had long, groping and apish hands for paws. A tail, longer than its body, whipped and flicked around as its oval shaped eyes studied Drustan. Pointed ears atop its head twitched excitedly. A row of tiny, sharp teeth glistened as they were licked by a violet forked tongue. The creature motioned at the cloak as it looked down at the helpless man.

“Better not wrig, wrig, wriggle or snap, snap, snap, and down you go!” the creature hissed with glee.

Drustan’s body tensed. He held himself perfectly still. Fire in his eyes, he stared at the blue beast with clenched teeth. Neither blinked; neither looked away. In the silence the two engaged in a battle of wills.

With its tail curling round excitedly, the creature began to speak once more. His tone was one of genuine sadness and delicious mockery.

“Quite the predicament you find yourself in, Swordhand of Kelliwic. Cannot go forwards, cannot go backwards, cannot go downwards, cannot go upwards. Below lies an icy death” – at which words the creature’s lips unfurled into a grin – “but above promises an endless journey wandering in a sea of cloud. Your quest is hang, hang, hanging by a thread – or two!” The creature was clearly amused at his witticism, as he began to cackle maniacally while clicking his clingy fingers.

“Such has been the condition of man in all seasons and times” retorted the gravelled voice of Drustan. “Yet, chattering goblin, I think that you know this and much, much more.”

“I am no goblin!” shouted the creature, drawing himself tall, chest pumped up, face indignant, teeth bared. The mist seemed to swirl, the waves below grew rougher, the sky darker. Drustan kept his gaze fixed on his interlocutor for what seemed like a lifetime. With a deep breath, the creature’s frown turned into a smile once more. The scene had returned to normal.

“Ooh ooh, hee hee, well said, Drustan son of Talorgan, well, well, well said.”

“How do you know me?”

“I know many things, Thane of Marc, many things long forgotten and hidden in secret places. It is my bless, bless, blessing and curse, curse, curse to see a man and the tapestry of his life as one; to read the struggles and strifes of a tree in its bark; to witness the birth and death of worlds in the shining light of a star. These eyes observe the past and discern the possible course within which your river will run.

“So, so, so, Drustan Son of Talorgan, I must now decide your fate, in this place and time. For I am the keeper of records, the Gate, Gate, Gatekeeper of the Isle of Glassssssssss. It is I alone who can open the way into the Garden of Apples. No thief can scale its walls; no ram can bat, bat, batter down its doors. The key belongs to me because I am the key.”

“Riddles upon riddles” whispered Drustan. He looked at the creature with new respect, though he remained on his guard. “Guardian of the Glass Fortress, Watcher of Time, by what price will you let me pass within these walls?”

With a sudden swipe of his blue furred hand, the Gatekeeper grabbed the cloak. He unhooked it from the wooden board and held it aloft in his clingy paw. Drustan was helpless as the creature began to lower his cloak towards the waters of the loch. Though small in stature, the Gatekeeper held Drustan’s weight as if he was a babe.

Nonetheless, Drustan would not go to his death without a fight. He kicked his legs back. Then, with all his power, he swung them forward. The cape slowly moved a few inches. As the warrior threw himself backwards, the cloak rocked with him. Again he launched onward, the fabric moving further than before. The Gatekeeper kept lowering, readying himself to release Drustan, but the warrior was swinging further and higher.

Swing back, kick forward.

Swing back, kick forward.

Pain screamed through his biceps as the strain of holding on grew greater, but he gripped more tightly. A few more lunges and his feet would touch the causeway once more.

Swing back, kick forward.

Swing back, kick forward.

“One more swing,” murmured Drustan, straining with all his might to keep a hold of the cloak. Swiping his legs forward with venom, he propelled himself one last time. Onwards he rushed, hurtling down through the air. As he approached the midpoint, the turn in the arc that he would rise from, he prepared to thrust his legs upwards.

As Drustan had been swinging upon the cape, the Gatekeeper’s demeanour had changed. At first, he watched the flailing warrior with bemusement, incredulous at the man’s attempt to rescue himself from a hopeless situation. However, as Drustan began to rise, his eyes slowly narrowed, his smile faded, his nostrils flared. By the time the orange clad man started his final ascent, the Gatekeeper’s face was aflame with rage.

Drustan kicked upwards. The Gatekeeper howled. It was long and piercing. The cloak went still. Drustan grabbed the cape more tightly, expecting to hurtle onwards with the momentum he had accrued. Except, he didn’t. His fingers did not tighten, and his body was motionless. It was not as if Drustan had hit an invisible wall, which would have been jarring. Instead, vitality had been drained from the man and his cloak. They were incapable of movement, unaffected by the elements, frozen in time. Drustan had no life or power in his chest and limbs. He only maintained control over his head, which turned upwards towards in protest.

“Know this, Gatekeeper of the Island of Glass! Nothing can stop me from my quest, nothing at all! Upon the mount of Eidyn I did slay three hundred wolfmen; I evaded the sorceries of black hags in the caves of Ninian; the tusked giant Ysbaddaden fell to my blade;” - at which words the Gatekeeper shuddered - “tamed have I the serpents that haunt the westward seas; the champions of Klingsor have fallen beneath my dagger. All these and more stood in my way, and they are no more. So, Gatekeeper, be assured, that I will gain entry to the Garden of Apples. Nothing will stop me, not even you, whether I be live or dead.”

“Ooh ooh, hee hee, strong words from a man dang, dang, dangling above a bed of spikes, powerless to move hand or foot!” chortled the Gatekeeper. “But do not be deceived, Drustan son of Talorgan; no stroke of force will compel me to open the way.”

He scratched the fur on his chin with his tail.

“I see the tapestries of men, beasts, birds and trees. Their lives I know, from acorn and hatchling. But whether they are good or nay, I cannot determine by sight alone. A man must persuade me that his cause is righteous. Then he will find the gates unlocked to the Isle of Glasssssssss. You have earned the right to an audience, having survived the initial trial that I have set before you. Speak your case, Drustan son of Talorgan!” Drustan inhaled deeply. He closed his eyes and thought of Iseult. Her smile calmed him. Looking up at the Gatekeeper, Drustan cleared his throat. “My cause is greater than any other. My beloved, Iseult, has been taken against her will. Melwas, Priest-King of Annwn, took my Lady from the court of Kelliwic, where I reside as Swordhand to my liege-lord, Marc. With much toil and travail, I scoured the land for my quarry. Day and night I did not rest; battered by rain, sleet and hail, I ploughed through forest, glade and moor. Seasons passed, and yet I wandered the lonely wastes in search of her.” Drustan’s speech quickened with excitement. “Ever on I strode until I met an ancient hermit at the Well O’Wearie. Within its waters he did scry Melwas and Iseult in the isle that you guard so precious. Renewed in vigour, I strode forth once more. Battling the monsters of the world, I looked for this secret realm, seeking signs in the mountain fortress and the caverns below. Through many trials I made my way across this land until I found this causeway, the path to my one true love.”

“All this I know, Swordhand of Kelliwic.”

“Aye, that you do, Keeper of Records, Watcher of Time. Yet, I ken that you do not discern the reason for my actions. Why did I traverse through brook and glen? Why contest with demons foul and fair? Why my labours in this life or the next?” Drustan paused to let the immensity of his questions make their impact upon his audience. The Gatekeeper remained unmoved.

With a sigh, a smile spread across Drustan’s weary face. “I love her, Gatekeeper. I love Iseult with all my heart. There is nothing in this world that I should want in exchange for her. Even if you offered all the riches in the mines of Traprain and Strathmore, the seven crowns of the seven emperors, and the worship of a million faithful souls, yet I would not give her up.” As

Drustan said these things, he had a far away look, as if his mind was some place else. He gazed off into the distance. The Gatekeeper remained expressionless. “I would rather die than be without her, and even in death I would search for her still. For in Iseult I find my joy; in Iseult I am made whole.

Then his attention returned. With steel in his voice, he declared: “Thus, I come to be with her. Then, I seek to rescue my Lady. At last, I shall avenge myself upon Melwas, who dared to separate my lover and I.”

“I fear your love would destroy all in its path, Swordhand,” the Gatekeeper replied in a mournful tone. His pointy ears had begun to droop.

“This is so. It is a storm casting aside all that stands before it, even that which has a strong foundation. For all is as shadow compared to Iseult.”

“Including the oaths you made to your liege-lord?”

The Gatekeeper’s response stung Drustan. He looked away with a pained expression. Slowly, he spoke, a single tear crawling down his bare cheek. “Aye. Marc I loved, as a son loves a father. He raised me in his household. My kinsman taught me how to strike with the sword, to release the arrow and to cleave with the axe. The thrill of the hunt, the carnage of battle, the wiles of womanfolk: these he taught me from morn till night. As I came of age he made me a thane of his court. Service I rendered as was his due, and more. To Isles of West I led his horde, reaping what we did not sow by the blade and spear. Keep after keep surrendered to my mastery, until we reached the capital of Tara. There the King of that people sent forth a champion, Finn McCuil, to wage war for the fate of his people. Seized by a maddening spirit, I challenged him to single combat, whereupon man and man exerted mind and muscle for the sake of glory.” Drustan winced as he said these words, feeling shooting pains from the wounds he had incurred during his fight with Finn McCuil. “In bloody action I felled this hero of Hibernia. I claimed the land and her people for my liege-lord, Marc. To secure his supremacy over this rebellious people, Marc was to marry the daughter of the King. This was Iseult, the very same who tended my wounds with herbs and ointments, though I had slain her betrothed in single combat. Though destined to be a bride brought forth from war for Marc, no fetter could bind the affection that grew between us as we sailed home to Kelliwic. Hours of merriment, laughter, dancing. We played chess and sang poems in praise of one another. By the time we had returned to my liege-lord’s keep, I was devoted to my Lady, and in secret tryst we made good our union in the cover of darkness.”

The Gatekeeper laughed incredulously. “You cuck, cuck, cuckolded your master, bringing dishonour and shame to his house, and you expect me to let you into the Castle of Glasssssssss?”

“Man and woman may be married in law, but true union is only found in the lover’s embrace,” Drustan responded with a fierce look. “Iseult was a prize of war, joined to Marc for political expediency. She bore him no love, not least because he had not won her with his own hand, but with mine. Frail of is he body; a withered

sword arm he was bequeathed in the fires of war. He saw contempt in her glance during unguarded moments, and long he resented her for it. Held together for the sake of imperial ambition, there was a mutual hatred between the pair. Their marriage was a sham." The Gatekeeper snarled, but Drustan went on. "In truth, it was I, who Marc in time feared and envied, who was yoked to Iseult. It is not for nothing that I have sought her across the land, while Marc remains hidden in his bedchamber quivering behind the walls of Kelliwic." Anger swept across Drustan as he pictured Marc, his liege-lord, sleeping comfortably next to a roaring fire in a darkened hall.

"Why would your liege-lord pursue a quarry that he was bound by contract to exchange for a castle built? Did he not promise the Druid-King the gift of Iseult if he would but use secret incantations to summon a troupe of gob, gob, goblins to build him the finest hall in Albion?"

"That he did." Drustan did not like this line of questioning.

"And why should he have done any other? Due to their estrangement, Marc never consummated his marriage to Iseult. He did not sell a wife; he traded an unmarried woman who found him repulsive. More than that, warrior of Kelliwic, the cuckold saw the looks you and she gave one another. In the watches of the night he crept through castle gardens in search of answers until, on one occasion, he did espy the two of you embraced in a lover's kiss." The Gatekeeper's eyes flared as the rage of Marc entered his mind. "In horror he fled, and bitter malice grew in his festering soul. Cold, cold, cold he dealt with her, but hot with you. She was reduced, a mere trinket in his eyes that could be used to attain a fairer bargain. Yet his kinsman, the boy he had loved as his own son, had aroused in him a molten fire. For you had betrayed him, your own flesh and blood." Drustan averted his eyes, ashamed at his treachery. "Though he is feeble of body and weak of will, shrewd is his mind and violence rules his heart. He wounded you, he wounded you, he wounded you more deeply than any blade can pierce, for he sundered you and your beloved."

"Marc may have had just cause to send Iseult away from his court," Drustan replied grudgingly. "He may even have the right to break my body and soul as a punishment for my adultery. Nevertheless, the deal he made with Melwas was dark and wicked. At the Well O'Wearie the hermit Lailoken foresaw what the Druid-King would do with my beloved. Upon the Stone of Destiny, at the heart of the Garden of Apples, he will plunge a knife into Iseult's soft bosom." Drustan paused for a moment, overcome by emotion. "I believe Marc knew this when he sold her to Melwas. He knew the doom she faced, or at least guess of it. He heard her cries as she was told her fate. He filled my cup with poison so that I would slumber when she was taken. He watched on as the ruffians carried her away on their large, jet-black horses. He kept me in chains forged by the spells of Melwas so that I would not chase after her. But the power of love cannot be overcome!" roared Drustan. "So long as I live, I will not let cold steel pierce her breast!"

"Dang, dang, dangling Drustan: the hermit speaks true, though he did not reveal all." The Gatekeeper stroked his tale with a clingy paw. His words were filled with sadness, though his expression was unmoved. "Ooh ooh, hee hee, did Lailoken tell you why Melwas plant to sacrifice your beloved in this Castle of Glassssssssss?"

"He did not, Gatekeeper."

"Then I shall enlighten you. In the Garden of Apples, worlds collide, for it is the origin of them all. The roots of the Ash Tree sink down into the realm of the dead, where poor souls find their final resting place. On its branches sprouted many lands, including the realms of Marc and the Isle of Albion. There are other places, beyond what can be reached by horse or hawk, that have grown from the Ash Tree. Each is an ap, ap, apple." The Gatekeeper halted his speech to see if Drustan understood his meaning, before continuing his explanation. But whereas before he had spoken in a matter-of-fact tone, now there was a hint of warning and reproach in his thin voice. "The apple of this world is rotting. In your love induced stupor, you have been blind to the barren waste that Albion has become. Kings, such as Marc, are lesser men, failing in body and mind. Their lands, once fruitful and bountiful, have become deserts. Brother fights brother, father slays son, daughter murders mother. The poor are robbed by the rich, the Lord of Stars is forgotten, invaders wait at the door. The beings of other ap, ap, apples are watching, Drustan, and they are hungry for what's left of this forsaken realm."

The Gatekeeper paused. His tail has stopped swishing. With a look of sympathy, he continued on. "It is foretold that upon the Stone of Destiny, set before the Ash Tree, the world can be reborn through the blood of a princess maiden from the Western Isle. Just as the tree gains nourishment from its roots, so the lands of the living feeds on the underworld. Her death will bring new life to your dying world. Her sacrifice will allow men to retain rule over their kingdoms. The invaders from other realms shall be repelled. Thus, Melwas seeks to strike Iseult and so, through her, restore this failing patch of earth. Though terrible is his deed, the cause is just."

Drustan gazed out across the waters of the loch. The waves lapped below, the breeze rustled his hair. Light grey clouds drifted across a cold, blue sky. He stared into the mists hovering ahead. He remembered places and times past.

Kelliwic, the market traders bustling in the streets while the bells chimed and pretty girls threw flowers in the air.

Rolling woodlands, squirrels and robins playing in the auburn leaves.

Sea spray flecking stubbled cheeks as the prow of the ship trammels the waves.

Cold, damp caves filled with gold, gems and treasure.

Finn McCuil sinks to his knees, a spear lodged in his chest.

Drustan closed his eyes.

Iseult smiling.

Drustan turned once more to his interlocutor. His heart had been resolved. He knew his course.

“I told you once before, Gatekeeper, that there is nothing in this world that I would trade for Iseult. It is all as dust compared to her. I would let this land die. I would let the Garden of Apples fall into nothingness. I would cut down the Ash Tree and throw it into the fires of the void before I let her go. Begone with life; begone with death. There is only the love shared between Iseult and I. Everything else can burn.”

The Gatekeeper gazed with wonder at the warrior before him. For several seconds he sat in silence, mouth ajar and tongue flicking. With a sudden change he hissed.

“These are the words of a knave, who would break the Wheel of Fortune for a woman! Drustan, Swordhand of Kelliwic, your cause is unjust and unnatural. I see no reason to let you enter the Island of Glass, to which you will surely bring destruction.”

At once Drustan felt life return to his limbs. The Gatekeeper began to lower the cloak once more. Tail whipping to and fro, he readied himself to let the cape go.

As he descended, Drustan cried out in desperation. “Watcher of Time, your knowledge is great, but you would know my quest is righteous if you but felt my love for her!”

“This I cannot do, child.”

“Nay, there is a way.”

At once, Drustan opened his lips and began to sing. He had a pure voice, that within the tenor range. His song was bursting with desire. The tune rose in a series of arcs, each one filled with longing and joy intertwined. Higher and higher the melody rose until, in ecstasy, absolute delight trickled down as a waterfall, before rising out of the ocean like a dolphin leaping high. Down and up, down and up, the tune flew. Faster and faster its tempo grew, soaring notes filled the air. Drustan’s lungs gave their all as his soul poured itself out in the fairest of melodies.

The Gatekeeper’s ears twitched with excitement. On the wind, a faint sound could be heard. It was a woman’s voice, strong and pure. Far in the distance was its source. It was singing... singing the same song as Drustan. It rose and fell in harmony with him, the two voices united and distinct, bound but not consumed by the other. Together their parts danced in pitch and rhythm, yearning for one another across their separation in time and space.

The Gatekeeper was moved. He felt their loss and their sorrow at being parted. He experienced their yearning, the seeking, their hoping. He longed for their love, for the thrill they had in each other’s arms. Their song echoed in his heart. Tears welled up. He had never cried before.

As the song drew towards its ending, the female voice gradually dwindled. Drustan was spent. He had no more to give. Last notes, filled with peaceful acceptance, lingered on until there was silence. All was still except Drustan, who swayed gently in the breeze.

Finally, the Gatekeeper spoke. He did so gravely. “You may enter, child”.

As he said so, the creature pulled the cloak up. Drustan ascended to the causeway. At the right moment he reached out with one hand to the wooden planks above him and, when sure that it would hold him, let go of the cape. He then pulled himself up. He expected to see the Gatekeeper, but the creature was gone. The mists had rolled back. Before him was a great gate, ten yards high, made of stained glass. Images were upon it, depicting stories of heroes from long ago. It was set in a crystal wall that was studded with gems shaped like fruits. The walls rose out of a lake, encircling a small island. The doors were open. Inside was a grassy path lined with flowers of every shape and colour.

Drustan threw off his cape and drew his dagger. He stepped over the threshold and proceeded into the Island of Glass, the Garden of Apples, the beginning of worlds where his beloved Iseult was awaiting him.



The One Ring and the Path of the Enlightenment

The Chemist



“The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air. Much that once was is lost, for none now live who remember it.”

Galadriel’s poignant intuition on the Third Age of Middle-earth (based on a similar sentiment by Treebeard in the books) strikes an eerie parallel with our modern world.

The European Enlightenment was underpinned by the naïve assumption that mankind could develop itself into a utopia by breaking the shackles of a transcendent religious moral order. It was similarly misguided in its belief that man is a largely rational creature who could live by bread alone.

The Enlightenment birthed Liberalism, Individualism, Materialism, Scientific Rationalism, and capital 'C' Capitalism. I believe that the steady advance of these facets of modernity have enriched us at a hidden cost, the cost of a qualitative and soulful existence which slips further into distant memory as each age passes.

The Lord of the Rings as an allegory.

John Tolkien made it clear, “I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history – true or feigned– with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers.”

I have some sympathy with these points, and have generally sought to engage with his work detached from time or place. However, I can’t help but feel his views greatly underestimated three things.

The first is that Tolkien talks as if he is set apart from history, thus discounting the phenomenal presence his work would have on *history itself*.

Secondly, even history is not a neutral entity, immune from the biases of mankind. It is often written by the victors and weaves a narrative as compelling as any work of fiction.

Thirdly, myth is often more powerful than fact. As important as historical facts are, the story of King Arthur, or the Iliad, likely carry more cultural weight among the masses than the accounts of Herodotus or Procopius. Whether Tolkien intended it to be so or not, *The Lord of the Rings* is viewed as an English mythology.

As much as I understand and respect Tolkien’s viewpoint, his work draws too many parallels with our own world to be ignored. Whether conscious or not, his time in history undoubtedly bore an influence on his decision to embark on the most ambitious work of fantasy England has ever produced. The beauty and wisdom his work contains should be explored to help guard against earthly ‘progress’.

Tolkien’s devilry.

Tolkien was a man who was drawn to create the languages of Middle-earth through his fascination with and admiration for Anglo Saxon England. He taught English language and literature at Oxford, and was a ‘Professor of Anglo Saxon’. He was further

interested in Celtic and Norse myth, languages which modernity has rendered all but extinct.

I believe Tolkien both witnessed and foresaw many of modernity’s ills. For a man who lamented allegory, he left a tantalising trail of breadcrumbs which, certainly in part, must explain his underlying motivations to embark on such an ambitious project at such a pivotal time in human history.

When Boromir is confronted with the site of a Balrog deep within the Mines of Moria, he fearfully asks Gandalf “What is this new devilry?”

With every stage of technological evolution, we have unleashed unnatural elements of our own to our lives and to nature, and with each iteration have strayed further and further from what it has meant to be human throughout most of history with each iteration of ‘development’.

The developmental bogeymen of Tolkien’s day were industrialisation and mechanised warfare.

We know that Tolkien was a lover of trees and saw the preservation of nature as an ultimate sacred duty, testaments to this can be seen in his work with the Ents and the Shire. It is further apparent that Tolkien was a Luddite, and despised the ‘fires of industry’. Tolkien himself grew up in the shadow of the ‘Black Country’, an area of the West Midlands, filled with mines, ironworks, smoke, and spoil heaps. The name “Mordor” means “Black Land” in Tolkien’s invented language of Sindarin. He further lamented the mass adoption of what he referred to as the “*infernal* combustion engine.”

Tolkien’s experience of the First World War was short and brutal. As an officer, he witnessed young men at the mercy of technological and biological ‘efficiencies’ in warfare. The notion of fighting for glory and honour died as quickly as the recruits being fed into the frontlines.

Saruman’s corruption and turn toward a ‘mind of metal’ undoubtedly stemmed from Tolkien’s own experience of Birmingham as a young lad confronting the domination industry had over the city at the time. I am far from the first to point this out. Tom Shippey, considered one of the world’s leading academic experts on the works of Tolkien, linked industrial Isengard to “Tolkien’s own childhood image of industrial ugliness... Sarehole Mill.” Shippey went on to claim that the character Tom Bombadil “represents the spirit of place of the Oxfordshire and Berkshire countryside, which Tolkien felt was vanishing.”

Rural Berkshire is a slice of England I have long known and loved. It is an ever-shrinking English haven within what increasingly feels like a mere ‘economic zone’, rather than a nation. Late last summer, I found myself driving through it on my way to the Cotswolds. Nowhere have I witnessed such an apparent contrast between charming-rural and industrial-urban England. I found myself in shock when I passed over a hill filled with blackberry bushes and ploughed fields, to be confronted with fumes bellowing out from Didcot power station. The scale of the funnel and blackness of the smoke was so imposing that it detracted from, and entirely dwarfed the countryside around it. It was a real

tower of Orthanc. I cannot comprehend the feeling of assault people who held nature as sacred would have felt at the scale of industry in times past.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Tolkien was partly motivated to put pen to paper to provide an escape from what he saw as the evils of his modernity, and to create a world where hope triumphs over corruption.

It is here, in identifying what one is against, that one often brings into sharp clarity what one is *for*.

The sanctity of tradition.

I strongly believe that Tolkien was *for*: tranquillity, order, and divinity, themes which run throughout his work. They are magic and faith, fraternity amongst kin, harmony with nature, and hierarchy. These are largely pre-Enlightenment values and form the pillars of a traditional way of life. There is a strong sense that the races of Middle-earth have stood for these foundations since the dawn of time.

The Shire, with its local produce, festivities, and architectural integration with nature, represents a quasi-pagan connection to the earth.

The horse lords on the plains of Rohan showcase the strength of intergenerational occupation. Edoras, atop a rocky escarpment, represents the stoic and enduring confidence of man in defiance of harsh mother nature.

Gondor, the most militaristic faction in the Third Age, and the closest to Mordor, represents courage and honour in the face of evil. The militaristic nature of these men, and Minas Tirith, the layered white city of Gondor, represent hierarchy.

The Elves represent eternal wisdom and Rivendell is their devotion to beauty.

The depictions of the Dwarves of Moria are less favourable, I see them mainly as a warning of greed. However, one could draw awe from their ability to create grandeur even in the darkest and lowest reaches of the world.

Of course, what unites these races collectively, and thus what unites their symbolic representations, is the abiding threat of The One Ring since it was conceived and forged.

The One Ring is a mysterious and ambiguous entity. Something that poses a threat to everyone and everything in Middle-earth, yet it is an overwhelmingly tempting prospect to men who are easily corrupted and alluring even to those with the iron will to withstand it.

It is implied that it can be used as a 'force for good', this is an interesting insight into Tolkien's thinking. Doubtless it could aid mankind, but what would be the sacrifice? Does man possess the ability to wield its power in a way that would optimise it for all ends? Or would the power that it would unleash be too great, too all-encompassing to optimise and control? The wisest of Middle-earth are doubtful and insist on its destruction. They know that it must be destroyed with its creator because if its power were unleashed, there would be no stopping it. It is an instrument with the ability to corrupt

and invert the sacred order of their world into one of greed, unjust rule and societal atomisation.

There is an element within all of us that is rational, that desires material comfort, convenience, and freedom from coercive authority. The Enlightenment granted us the ability to advance these desires at a record pace. Over the last five hundred years, mankind has soared to heights inconceivable to our ancestors. History showed us that the temptation to explore beyond our confines was too powerful to resist.

However, although technological and material advancements have become the fruits of our age, they contain within them the seeds of corruption and subversion of all that is divinely ordered and traditional for our European way of life. Just as The One Ring posed a grave threat to Middle-earth, the path we have taken over recent centuries is one we should be very wary of. I fear that if left unchecked, it has either condemned us to forever wander, lost in the undergrowth and hopelessly lost from the village that raised us, or it will lead us off a cliff.

As much as the themes of anti-industrialisation are clear in *The Lord of the Rings*, industry is only part of the story of our development since the Enlightenment.

The speed at which change has occurred since the Enlightenment is one of the more pervasive and insidious elements of it. Our notions of the past can be susceptible to nostalgia, and there were many serious issues in Edwardian Britain. Tolkien lamented the changes of his day. Yet, how many of us yearn for such an era of etiquette, customs, wholesome literature, local community, and a slower pace of life?

Eras where inter-generational knowledge could have passed virtually unaffected by change have passed. They have given way to disconnection and ignorance of our history. Attempts have been made to smear the values our ancestors held dear and took as self-evident.

Our devilry.

Tolkien's lamentations over modernity were timely. He wrote and published *The Lord of the Rings* at the intersection of pre-World War Two and neo-liberal modernity. Indeed, I believe *The Lord of the Rings*, likely unbeknownst to Tolkien himself at the time, was the final great work of fantasy to be created that was influenced by olde England *and* based almost exclusively on traditional values to be created.

It was confident and sold well because it had two essential ingredients; a country still sure of itself, with a firm cultural identity, and it was written in pre-neo-liberal setting, before the issues of our time revealed themselves.

We now have as our *raison-d'être* economic 'Growth'. Shareholder capitalism has resulted in a never-ending appetite for profit, regardless of the physical degradation of our environment and the breakdown of communities.

Skills once passed down from parent to child through generations have been shelved in favour of outsourcing.

Those who still try to apply practical skills often find they are outpaced by time itself and the market, rendering once vital knowledge obsolete. Cheap, mass consumption often results in things being replaced, rather than fixed.

Collective belief in a higher being has broken under the weight of individualist liberalism, the power of self-interested hedonism, and globalisation.

Time to slow down has been confined to holiday allowances.

Time for nature has given way to corporate Key Performance Indicators.

The rule and age of noble kings has long given way to the rule and age of merchants.

“Even the smallest person can change the course of history.”

Before the battle of the Black Gate, Aragon turns to his battle-weary and fatigued comrades *"A day may come, when the courage of men fails, when we forsake our friends, and break all bonds of fellowship. An hour of wolves, and shattered shields, when the Age of men comes crashing down. But it is not this day, this day, we fight. By all that you hold dear, I bid you stand, men of the west!"*

For those reading this who share a sense of sorrow at the confines of modernity. Take solace from the fact that you are not alone. There is still a lot of Europe to hold dear, great literature, art, rebellion, and hope for the future.

‘Ride the tiger’, is an East Asian proverb based on the notion that once something is in motion, it is sometimes wise to straddle and utilise its momentum rather than fight against it. Technological advancements have the potential to develop to such a degree that we can re-awaken pastimes long thought to be extinct, allowing us to reconnect with our past. We simply need to keep our history and customs alive as we leap into the unknown.

The path that we have chosen may have taken us far from the village that raised us, but there is always the possibility that we can form a new one based on what we have the ability to access in the here and now, and in the future.

So long as we exist, the humanity within us cannot die. Within every Gollum, there is a Smeagol.



AUTOMATION

America has fallen.

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

Get it on
AMAZON
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The Rose-Tree

English Fairy Tales compiled by Joseph Jacobs



There was once upon a time a good man who had two children: a girl by a first wife, and a boy by the second. The girl was as white as milk, and her lips were like cherries. Her hair was like golden silk, and it hung to the ground. Her brother loved her dearly, but her wicked stepmother hated her. "Child," said the stepmother one day, "go to the grocer's shop and buy me a pound of candles." She gave her the money; and the little girl went, bought the candles, and started on her return. There was a stile to cross. She put down the candles whilst she got over the stile. Up came a dog and ran off with the candles.

She went back to the grocer's, and she got a second bunch. She came to the stile, set down the candles, and proceeded to climb over. Up came the dog and ran off with the candles.

She went again to the grocer's, and she got a third bunch; and just the same happened. Then she came to her stepmother crying, for she had spent all the money and had lost three bunches of candles.

The stepmother was angry, but she pretended not to mind the loss. She said to the child: "Come, lay your head on my lap that I may comb your hair." So the little one laid her head in the woman's lap, who proceeded to comb the yellow silken hair. And when she combed the hair fell over her knees, and rolled right down to the ground.

Then the stepmother hated her more for the beauty of her hair; so she said to her, "I cannot part your hair on my knee, fetch a billet of wood." So she fetched it. Then said the stepmother, "I cannot part your hair with a comb, fetch me an axe." So she fetched it.

"Now," said the wicked woman, "lay your head down on the billet whilst I part your hair." Well! she laid down her little golden head without fear; and whist! down came the axe, and it was off. So the mother wiped the axe and laughed.

Then she took the heart and liver of the little girl, and she stewed them and brought them into the house for supper. The husband tasted them and shook his head. He said they tasted very strangely. She gave some to the little boy, but he would not eat. She tried to force him, but he refused, and ran out into the garden, and took up his little sister, and put her in a box, and buried the box under a rose-tree; and every day he went to the tree and wept, till his tears ran down on the box.

One day the rose-tree flowered. It was spring, and there among the flowers was a white bird; and it sang, and sang, and sang like an angel out of heaven. Away it flew, and it went to a cobbler's shop, and perched itself on a tree hard by; and thus it sang,

*"My wicked mother slew me,
My dear father ate me,
My little brother whom I love
Sits below, and I sing above
Stick, stock, stone dead."*

"Sing again that beautiful song," asked the shoemaker. "If you will first give me those little red shoes you are making." The cobbler gave the shoes, and the bird sang the song; then flew to a tree in front of a watchmaker's, and sang:

*"My wicked mother slew me,
My dear father ate me,
My little brother whom I love
Sits below, and I sing above
Stick, stock, stone dead."*

"Oh, the beautiful song! sing it again, sweet bird," asked the watchmaker. "If you will give me first that gold watch and chain in your hand." The jeweller gave the watch and chain. The bird took it in one foot, the shoes in the other, and, after having repeated the song, flew away to where three millers were picking a millstone. The bird perched on a tree and sang:

*"My wicked mother slew me,
My dear father ate me,
My little brother whom I love
Sits below, and I sing above
Stick!"*

Then one of the men put down his tool and looked up from his work,
"Stock!"

Then the second miller's man laid aside his tool and looked up,
"Stone!"

Then the third miller's man laid down his tool and looked up,
"Dead!"

Then all three cried out with one voice: "Oh, what a beautiful song! Sing it, sweet bird, again." "If you will put the millstone round my neck," said the bird. The men did what the bird wanted and away to the tree it flew with the millstone round its neck, the red shoes in one foot, and the gold watch and chain in the other. It sang the song and then flew home. It rattled the millstone against the eaves of the house, and the stepmother said: "It thunders." Then the little boy ran out to see the thunder, and down dropped the red shoes at his feet. It rattled the millstone against the eaves of the house once more, and the stepmother said again: "It thunders." Then the father ran out and down fell the chain about his neck.

In ran father and son, laughing and saying, "See, what fine things the thunder has brought us!" Then the bird rattled the millstone against the eaves of the house a third time; and the stepmother said: "It thunders again, perhaps the thunder has brought something for me," and she ran out; but the moment she stepped outside the door, down fell the millstone on her head; and so she died.



The Kiss of Fate

Rider Haggard (1923) with introduction by Nathan CJ Hood



John William
Waterhouse,
Circe
Offering the
Cup to
Ulysses (1891)

Adventure and romance, religion and meaning. These define the rip-roaring works of Sir Henry Rider Haggard. Son of a distinguished family with ties to the British Empire, he was sent off to South Africa in the 1870s to work in the Imperial bureaucracy. Working for the special commissioner, he had ample opportunity to meet charismatic explorers, such as Frederick Selous and Frederick Russel Burnham. Haggard's imagination was enraptured by the exploits of such men, and when he returned to England in the 1880s, he embarked on a successful literary career. His works were a major influence upon several writers, notably Rudyard Kipling, JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis.

Haggard came to international fame with King Solomon's Mines (1885), despite its initial rejection by publishers. This was because he was doing something new. While there may have been predecessors, King Solomon's Mines sparked a novel genre, 'the Lost World'. It tapped into the Victorian Brit's desire to explore and conquer the globe, to find uncharted territory and discover arcane secrets. Beyond the tantalising prospect of an unexplored space brimming with treasures, the Lost World type of story also provided a space within which British heroes could leave civilised life behind and prove their metal on the borders of the known world, entering realms untouched by government decree and the truncheon of the local policeman.

While many good and great adventure stories focus on the thrill of the frontier, Haggard went further and integrated another element into his stories. Best exemplified by She: A History of Adventure (1887), he tangled with love and sexuality. Many of the women in his stories are femme fatales that could be straight out of a pre-Raphaelite painting. They are beautiful, so much so that they seduce any man who crosses their path. They are strong, powerful, generous and tyrannical. As these women interact with the men that cross their paths, Haggard conjures in his reader's mind the force of all-consuming desire, the struggle for self-control and the guilt of moral compromise.

What emerges from this blend of genres is something akin to a medieval romance, such as Tristan & Isolde, interweaved with Indiana Jones, of which it is an ancestor. A stirring and enticing fusion!

The extract published here was written towards the end of Haggard's life. It was the fifth chapter in Wisdom's Daughter (1923), a prequel to She, though the story stands on its own. Set in Ancient Egypt, it wrestles with some knotty questions. Can religious devotion or the human will ever overcome the power of love? Do they have a hold on our desires? What are the consequences of discarding sacred duty? How does illicit romance, even for a moment, change us? And do we even have control when it comes to affairs of the heart?

So travel back in time enjoy this short story by a master of his craft, an exemplar of storytelling both in heroic and romantic modes, and a pioneer of English literature.

There came a man to Philæ. Watching from a pylon top whither I had gone to pray alone, I saw him land upon the island and from far off noted that he was a godlike man, clad in armour such as the Grecians used, over which was thrown a common cloak, hooded as though to disguise him; one who had the air of a warrior. At a distance from the temple gate he halted and looked upward as though something drew his glance to me standing high above him upon the pylon top. I could not

see his face because of the shadow thrown by the great walls behind which the sun was sinking, but doubtless he could see me well enough, whose shape was outlined against the veil of golden light that must have touched me with its glory, though, as that light was behind me, my face also would be hidden from him. At least he stood a little while as though amazed, staring upward steadily, then bowed his head and passed into the temple, followed by men bearing burdens.

Some pilgrim to the shrine, I thought to myself, then turned my mind to other matters, remembering that with men I had no more to do. Thus for the first time here in the body, all unknowing, I looked upon Kallikrates and he looked on me, but often afterward I have thought that there was a veiled lesson or a parable in the fashion of this meeting.

For did I not stand far above him, clothed in the glory of heaven's gold, and did he not stand far beneath in the gloom of the shadows that lay upon the lowly earth, so that between us there was space unclimbable? And has it not been ever thus throughout the centuries, for am I not still upon the pylon top clad in the splendour of the spirit, and is he not still far beneath me wrapped with the shadows of the flesh? And since as yet the secret of the pylon stair is hidden from him, must I not descend to earth if we would meet, leaving the light and my pride of place that I may walk humbly with him in the shadow? And is it not often so between those that love, that one is set far above the other, though still this rope of love draws them together, uplifting the one, or dragging down the other?

The man passed into the temple and that night I heard he was a Grecian captain of high blood, one who though young had seen much service in the wars and done great deeds, Kallikrates by name, who had come to seek the counsel of the goddess, bringing precious gifts of gold and Eastern silks, the spoil of battles in which he had fought.

I asked why such an one sought the wisdom of Isis, and was told that it was because his heart was troubled. It seemed that he had been dwelling at Pharaoh's court as a captain of the Grecian guard, and that there he had quarrelled with and slain one who was as a brother to him, if indeed he were not his very brother. This ill deed, it was said, preyed upon his soul and drove him into the arms of Mother Isis, seeking for pardon and that comfort which he could not find at the hand of any of the gods of the Greeks.

Again I asked idly enough why this Kallikrates had killed his familiar friend or his brother, whichever it might be. The answer was—because of some highly placed maiden whom both of them loved, so that they fought from jealousy, after the fashion of men. For this reason the life of Kallikrates was held to be forfeit according to the stern military law of the Grecian soldiers, and he must fly. Also the deed had tarnished that great lady's name; also his heart was broken with remorse and hither he came to pray Isis to mend it of her mercy, he who had forsaken the world.

The tale moved me a little, but again I cast it from my mind, for are not such things common among

men? Always the story is the same: two men and a woman, or two women and a man, and bloodshed and remorse and memories which will not die and the cry for pardon that is so hard to find.

Yes, I cast it from my mind, saying lightly—oh! those evil-omened words—that doubtless his own blood in a day to come would pay for that which he had spilt.

For a while, some months indeed, this Grecian Kallikrates vanished from my sight and even from my thoughts, save when, from time to time, I heard of him as studying the Mysteries among the priests, having, it was said, determined to renounce the world and be sworn to the service of the goddess. Noot told me that he was very earnest in this design and made great progress in the faith, which pleased the priests who desired above all things to convert those that served Grecian gods with whom the deities of Egypt, and above all Isis, were at war. Therefore they hastened his preparation so that as soon as might be he should be bound to the Heavenly Queen by bonds that could not be loosed.

At length his fasts and instruction were completed; his trials had been passed and the hour came when he must make his last confession to the goddess and swear the awful oaths to her very self.

Now since Isis did not descend to earth to stand face to face with every neophyte, it was needful in this great ceremony that one filled with her spirit should take her place and as may be guessed, that one was I, Ayesha the Arab. To speak truth, in all Egypt, because of my beauty, my learning, and the grace that was given to me, there was none so fitting to wear her mantle as myself. Indeed afterward this was acknowledged when, with a single voice, the Colleges of her servants throughout the land, men and women together, promoted me to be her high-priestess, and gave me, who aforetime among them was known by the title of Wisdom's Daughter, the new name of *Isis-come-to-earth*, or in shorter words, *The Isis*. For my own name of Ayesha I kept hid lest it should be discovered that I was that chieftainess, the child of Yarab, who had defeated the army of Nectanebes.

Therefore at a certain hour of the night, draped in the holy robes, wearing on my brow the vulture cap and the bent symbol of the moon, holding in my hand the *sistrum* and the cross of Life, I was conducted to the pillared sanctuary and seated alone upon the throne of blackest marble, with the round symbol of the world for my footstool.

Thus, having learned my part and the ancient hallowed words that I must say, I sat awhile wondering in my heart whether Isis herself could be more glorious or more fair. So indeed did the priests and priestesses who saw me thus arrayed and bent the knee to me as though I were the very goddess, which in truth many of the humbler among them half believed.

Thus I sat in the moonlight that flowed from the unroofed hall beyond, while the carven gods watched me with their quiet eyes.

At length I heard the sound of footsteps whereon there came a priestess and flung over me the white veil of innocence sewn with golden stars that until the

appointed moment must hide Isis from her worshipper. The priestess withdrew and, wrapped in the dark, hooded robe that signified the stained flesh about to be cast away, which hid all of him so that his face could not be seen, came that tall neophyte led by two priests who held his right hand and his left. I noted those hands because they were so white against the blackness of the robe, and even by the moonlight saw that they were beautiful, long and thin and shapely, though the palm of one, the right, was somewhat broadened as though by long handling of the tools of war.

The priests led him to the entrance of the shrine and in hushed whispers bade him kneel upon a footstool and make his sacrifice and confession to the goddess as he had been taught to do. Then they departed leaving us alone.

There followed silence which at length I broke, whispering,

"Who is this that comes to visit the Mother in her earthly shrine and what is his prayer to the Queen of Heaven and Earth?"

Though I spoke so gently and so low, perhaps because of their very sweetness, my words seemed to frighten him, or perhaps he believed that he stood in the very presence of the goddess; at least he answered in a voice that trembled,

"O holy Queen adored, in the world I was named Kallikrates the comely. But the priests, O Queen, have given me a new name, and it is, *Lover-of-Isis*."

"And what have you to say to Isis, O Lover-of-Isis?"

"O Queen eternal, I have to tell my sins and ask her pardon for them, I who have passed the Trials and am accepted by her servants. If it is granted, then to her I must make the oath, binding myself eternally to love and serve her, her and no other in heaven or on earth."

"Set out those sins, O Lover-of-Isis, that my Majesty may judge of them, whether they can be forgiven or are beyond forgiveness," I answered in the words of the appointed ritual.

Then he began and told a tale that made me redden behind my veil, for all of it had to do with women, and never before had I learned what wantons those Greeks could be. Also he told of men whom he had slain in war, one of them in the battle against my tribe, in which strangely enough it seemed he had fought as a lad, for this man was a great warrior. Of these killings, however, I took no account, because they had been of those who were the enemies of himself or of his cause.

In stern silence I listened, noting that save for these matters of light love and fightings, the man seemed innocent enough, for in his story there was naught of baseness or of betrayal. Moreover, it seemed that he was one in whom the spirit had striven against the flesh, and who, however much his feet were tangled in the poisonous snares of earth, from time to time had set his eyes on Heaven.

At length he paused and I asked of him,

"Is the black count finished? Tell now the truth and dare to hold nothing back from the goddess who notes all."

“Nay, O Queen,” he answered, “the worst is yet to come. I came to Egypt as a captain of the Grecian guard that watches the House of Pharaoh at Sais. With me came another man, my half-brother, for our father was the same, with whom I was brought up and loved as never I loved any other man, and who loved me. He was a glorious warrior, though some held that I was more handsome in my person, Tisisthenes by name, that in my Grecian tongue in which I speak means the Avenger. Thus was he called because my father, whose first-born he was, desired that he might grow up to work vengeance upon the Persians who slew his father named like myself, Kallikrates, the most beautiful Spartan that was ever born. Foully they slew him before the battle of Plataea, whilst he was aiding the great Pausanias to make sacrifice to the gods. This Tisisthenes my brother I killed with my own hand.”

“For what cause did you kill him?”

“There was a royal maiden at that court, one fairer than any woman has been, is, or will be—ask not her name, O Mother, though doubtless it is known to you already. This lady both of us saw at the same time and by the decree of Aphrodite both of us loved. As it chanced it was I who won her favour, not my brother. We were spied upon; the tale was told; trouble fell upon that royal maiden who, when she should be old enough, was sworn in marriage to a distant king. To save her name she made denial, as she must do. She swore there was naught between her and me, and to prove it turned her face from me and toward my brother. I came upon them together in a garden. She had plucked a flower which she gave to him and he kissed the hand that held the flower. She saw me and fled away. I, maddened with jealousy, smote my beloved brother in the face and forced him to fight with me. We fought. He guarded himself but ill, as though he cared nothing of the end of that fray. I cut him down. He lay before me dying, but ere he died, he spoke:

“This is a very evil business,” he said. “Know, Kallikrates, my most beloved brother, that what you saw in the garden between that royal maid and myself was but a plot to save you both, since thereby I purposed to take on to my own head the weight of your transgression against the law of this land, because she prayed it and it was my wish. This I have done, and for this reason I suffered you to slay me, though during that fight twice I could have pierced you, because you were blinded with rage and forgot your swordsmanship. Now it will be said that you found me pursuing this royal maiden and rightly slew me according to your duty and that it was I who loved her and not you, as has been commonly reported. Yet in truth I love her well and am glad to die because it was to you that her heart turned and not to me; also because thereby I save both her and you. Yet, Kallikrates, my brother, the gods give me wisdom and foresight in this the hour of my death, and I say that you will do well to have done with this lady and all women, and to seek rest in the bosom of the gods, since, if you do not, great trouble will come upon you, and through this same curse of jealousy such a death as mine shall be yours also. Now let us who are the victims of Fate kiss each other on the brow as we used to do when we were

children, playing together in the happy fields of Greece, from whom death was yet a long way off, forgiving each other all and hoping that we may meet once more in the region of the Shades.’

“So we embraced, and my brother Tisisthenes gave up his spirit in my arms and looking on him I wished that I were dead in his place. Then as I turned to go the soldiers of our company found me and seeing that I had slain my brother, would have brought me to trial, not because we had fought together, but because he was my superior in rank and therefore I who, being under his command, drew sword on him, by the law of the Greeks, must die. Yet before I could be put upon my trial, some of those who loved me and guessed the truth of the business thrust me out of our camp disguised, with all the treasure that I had won in war, bidding me hide myself awhile till the matter was forgotten. O Queen, I did not desire to go; nay, I desired to stay and to pay the price of my sin. But they would not have it so. I think indeed that there were others behind, great ones of Egypt, moving in this matter; at least I was thrust forth, all being made easy for me, and all eyes growing blind.”

Again he paused, and I, Ayesha, clothed as the goddess, asked,

“And what did you then, you who could slay your brother for the sake of woman?”

“Then, Divine One, I fled up Nile where, because of the trouble that was in the land, Pharaoh’s arm could not reach me, nor the arm of the commander of the Greeks. Tarrying not and without speech with that high maiden who was the cause of my sin, I fled up Nile.”

“Why did you fly up Nile and not back to your own people, O most sinful man?”

“Because my heart is broken, Queen, and I desired to seek the mercy of Isis whose law I had learned already and to become her priest. I knew that those who bow themselves to her may look no more on woman, but thenceforth must live virgin to the death, and it was my will to look no more on woman, since woman had stained my hands with a brother’s blood, and therefore I hated her.”

Now I, Ayesha, asked,

“What gods did you worship before your heart was turned to Isis, Queen of Heaven?”

“I worshipped the gods of Greece and first among them Aphrodite, Lady of Love.”

“Who has paid you well for your service, making of you a murderer of one of your own blood who, before she blinded your eyes, was more to you than any on the earth. Do you then renounce this wanton Aphrodite?”

“Aye, Queen, I renounce her for ever. Never more will I offer at her altars or look on woman in the way of love. If I may have pardon for my sins, here and now I vow myself to Isis as her faithful priest and servant. Here and now I blot the name of Aphrodite from my heart; yea, I reject her gifts and tread down all her memories beneath my aspiring feet that at last shall bear my soul to peace.”

Thus the man spoke in a quivering and earnest voice, and was silent. Yes, deep silence reigned in that

Featured Artist

Ben Pook

linktr.ee/benpook

Tell us a little bit about yourself. I'm a self taught artist from the Isle of Wight in the United Kingdom. I'm mainly known for military history paintings. I've done work for many private customers, publishers and military personnel across the globe.

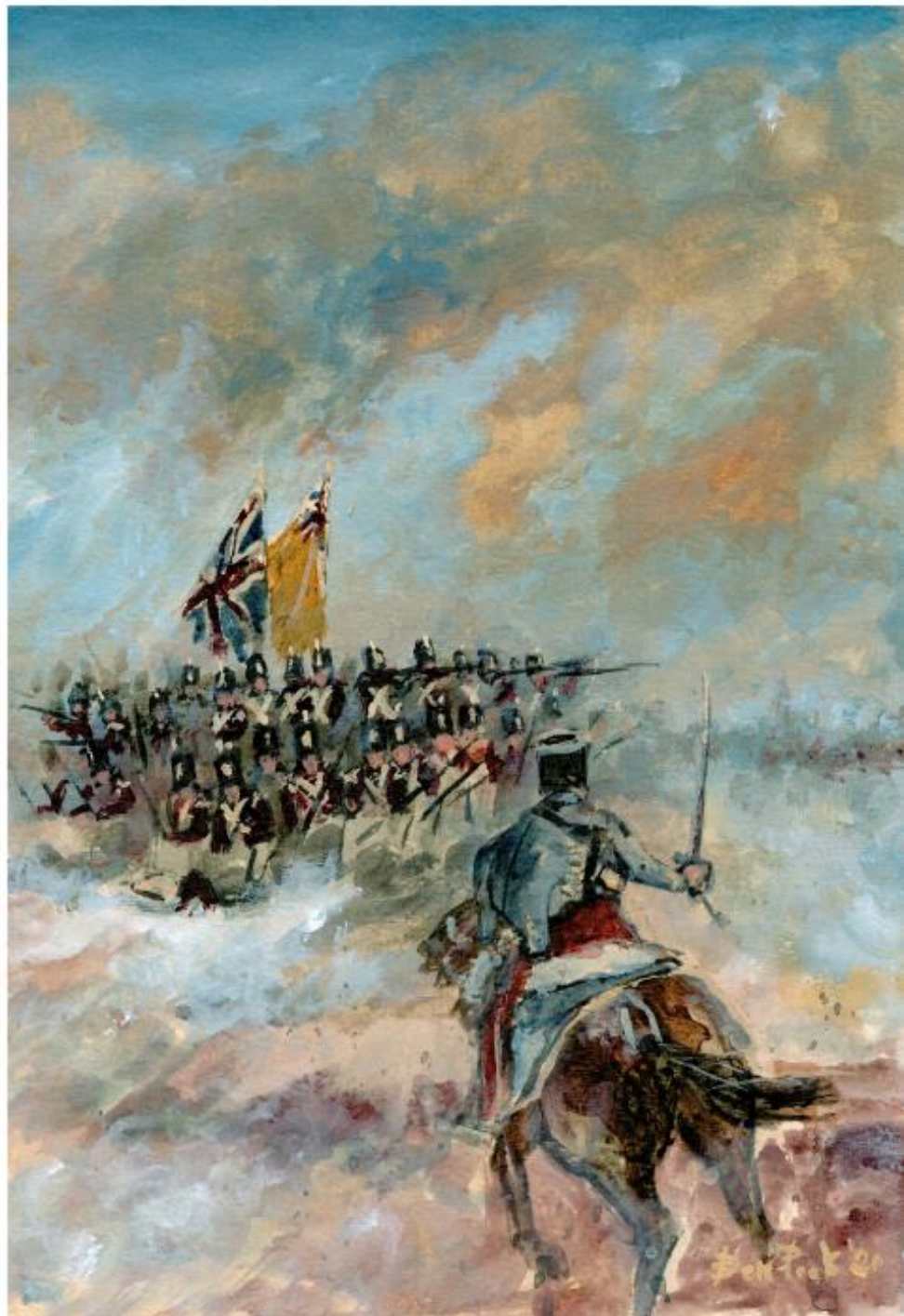
Acrylic seems to be your go-to medium, why is that? I mainly work with acrylic paint on watercolour paper and to a lesser degree acrylic ink and pen.

I like that with acrylic paint you have the variety of using it within a range of thick like oil paint and then varied degrees of watered down to washes like watercolour paint. Its quick drying time also suits the speed I like to work at, aids in quick layering and alterations and is great for commercial work.

What draws you to the Napoleonic wars?

My interest in the Napoleonic era started in the 90s watching and reading the Sharpe series as a child, repeatedly watching episodes daily and drawing. That set a steadfast love for that era that I never tire of exploring and learning more about. There are many elements that make the era appealing; the visuals and varieties of clothing, the vastness and epic nature of the battlefield full of smoke and fire, which suits art perfectly. The variety of nations involved and variations of campaign offers many potential new flavours.

British Infantry Square



Emotionally it ranges from the most heroic and aspirational moments to crude horror and misery. Also there is the element where it sits for the public: it is close enough to still have an emotional connection for some yet far enough removed to not cause any great offence. For instance, there are endless historical eras after that will have an increasing element of walking on eggshells when portraying.

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

For a long time the books I read are artistic compilations and educational books, I have 100s but some of which I will pick up regularly are: Color and Light by James Gurney, and Imaginative Realism by James Gurney, Battlefield Panoramas by Victor Ambrus, The Hobbit Sketchbook by Alan Lee, and Drawing from History: The Forgotten Art of Fortunino Matania.



Hussar

The Karl Kopinski sketchbooks are also great to flick through. The last book I bought was UPROAR!: Satire, Scandal and Printmakers in Georgian London by Alice Loxton.

As side from painting, do you have any other passions? Music. I have been a professional musician off and on since College. Playing and teaching guitar had been a main income for many years up until the government lockdowns at which point I started to focus more on Art.

Advance of the Old Guard



La mort à cheval



holy place, whilst I, Ayeshah, although it is true that as a woman I misdoubted me of such rash oaths, as the minister of the goddess, prepared myself to grant pardon to this seeker in the hallowed, immemorial words, and to open to his troubled heart the doors of purity and rest eternal.

Then suddenly in that silence clearly I heard the sound of silvery laughter, soft, sweet laughter that seemed to come from the skies above and though it was so low to fill the shrine and all the hall beyond. I looked about me but could see naught. It would seem, too, that the Greek heard also, for he turned his head and looked behind him, then once more let it fall upon his hands.

Whence came that sound? Could it be that she of Paphos—? Nay, it was impossible, and not thus would I be turned from my office, I who was clothed with the robe and for that hour wielded the might of Isis.

“Hearken, O man, in the world named Kallikrates,” I said. “On behalf of Isis, the All-Mother, goddess of virtue and of wisdom, speaking with her voice, hearing with her ears, and filled with her soul, I wash you clean of all your sins and accept you as her priest, promising to you light burdens on the earth and beyond the earth great rewards for ever. First swear the oath that may not be broken, and then draw near that I may kiss you on the brow, accepting you as the slave and lover of Isis, from this day until the moon, her heavenly throne, shall crumble into nothingness.”

Having spoken thus, letting the words fall one by one, slowly as the tears of the penitent fell upon the ground, I uttered the oath, the form of which even now I must not write.

It was a dreadful oath covering all things, and binding him who took it to Isis alone, an oath that if it were forgot wrought upon the traitor the agelong doom of death in this world and woe in the worlds to come, till by slow steps, with pierced heart and bleeding feet, the holy height from which he had fallen should be climbed again.

At length it was finished and he said faintly,
“I swear! With fear and trembling still I swear!”

Then I beckoned to him with the *sistrum* of which the little shaken bells made a faint compelling music that already he had learned to follow, and he came and kneeled before me. There I laid the Cross of Life upon his head and gave him blessing, laid it upon his lips and gave him wisdom, laid it upon his heart and gave him existence for thousands upon thousands of years. All these things I did in the name and with the strength of Isis the Mother.

Came the last rite, the greeting of the Mother to her child new-born in spirit, the rite of the Kiss of welcome. At that moment supreme a light fell on me from above: perchance it came from Heaven, perchance it was an art of the watching priests; I do not know. At least it fell upon me illumining my glittering robes and jewelled headdress with a soft splendour in the darkness of that shrine. At that moment, too, at a touch my veil fell down, so that the moonlight struck full upon my face making it mystical and lovely in the frame of my flowing hair.

The priest new-ordained lifted his bent head that I might consecrate his brow with the Kiss of welcome, and his hood fell back. The moonlight shone on his face also, his beautiful face like to that of a sculptured Grecian god, shapely, fine-featured, large-eyed, and crowned with little golden curls—for as yet he was unshorn; yes, a face more beautiful than that which I had seen on any man, set above a warrior’s tall and sinewy form.

By Isis! I knew this face; it was that which had haunted me from childhood, that which often I had seen in a dream of halls beyond the earth, that of a man who in this dream had been sworn to me to complete my womanhood. Oh! I could not doubt, it was the same, the very same, and looking on it, the curse of Aphrodite fell upon me and for the first time I knew the madness of our mortal flesh. Yea, my being was rent and shattered like a cedar beneath the lightning stroke; I was smitten through and through. I, the priestess of Isis, proud and pure, was as lost as any village maid within her lover’s arms.

The man, too! He saw me and his aspect changed; the holy fervour went out of his eyes and into them entered something more human, something more fateful. It was as though he, too, remembered—I know not what.

With a mighty effort of the will, aware that the eyes of the goddess and perchance of her priests also were upon me, I conquered myself and with beating heart and heaving breast bent down to touch his brow with the Kiss of ceremony. Yet, I know not how—I know not if the fault were his or mine or perchance of both of us—it was his *lips* I touched, not his brow, just touched them and no more.

It was nothing, or at any rate but a little thing, in one instant come and gone, and yet to me it was all. For in that touch I broke my holy vows, and he, new-sworn to the worship of the goddess, broke his, yes, in the very act of sacrifice. What drove us to it? I do not know, but once again I thought I heard that low, triumphant laughter, and it came into my mind that we were the sport of an indomitable power greater than ourselves and all the oaths that mortals swear to gods or men.

I waved my sceptre. The new-made priest arose, bowed and withdrew, I wondering of whom he was the priest—of Isis or of Aphrodite. The singing of a distant choir broke out upon the silence, the hierophants came and led him away to be of their company till his death: the ceremony was ended. My attendants, arrayed as the goddesses Hathor and Nut, conducted me from the shrine. I was unrobed of my sacred panoplies and once more from a goddess became a woman, and as a woman I sought my couch and wept and wept.

For had I not at the first temptation in my heart broken the law and betrayed the trust of her who, as then I believed, is and was and shall be; her whose veil no mortal man had lifted, the Mother of the sun and all its stars?

A Song of Spring: A Sword Fit For A King

Part 3

Forging the Man

AR Green



“Take a seat, son.”

Findan stepped up to the large round table; two of the five chairs were empty. Across from Kildan sat a portly, middle aged man wearing the ornate white robes of a Wyrdmun; beside him sat a skinny man dressed in fine furs. The two men turned, watching Findan walk around to his father’s right hand. The young Leodson pulled out the heavy ash chair and seated himself. Settling into his chair, Findan caught a flash of envy on Coyn’s face; the thin man shifted his gaze from Findan to a dull spot on the silver band of stewardship he wore upon his own wrist.

“Okay Coyn, continue,” said Kildan.

As he finished polishing the silver band with his sleeve, Coyn looked up and said, “As I was saying, my Leod, news first arrived of attacks by creatures in the woods near Ofersea six days ago. We doubled our patrols in the area, but the beasts were smart enough to not engage the guardsmen - they focused on the fleeing villagers.”

“Do we have any idea where the creatures came from?” asked Kildan.

Coyn shrugged.

The portly man chimed in, “My Leod, the stars have been moving toward a strange alignment for many moons now. The monsters you talk of belong to the old world. It seems to me that evils long dormant are beginning to awaken once more. If we are to deal with these demons, we must look to the teachings of our forefathers.”

Kildan nodded, “These are weird times indeed Dormund, my old friend; the King made clear why my son and I were called to his council - he has been granted a vision by the Gods. He spoke of black tides rising up to swallow our lands, and set out that there is only one hope to save us all - my son and I are to travel beyond the Thregar River in search of the sword of Lodric the Great.”

The Wyrdmun gasped, and Coyn’s eyes widened.

“That is a tall ask, my Leod. That sword has not been seen since the fall, and the Borderlands are no place for a boy,” said Dormund, in a hushed tone, with worry upon his face.

“I’m ready! In only five days I will be sixteen, a man fully grown,” said Findan confidently.

Kildan looked at Findan, carefully weighing up his son’s words - were these just the foolhardy hopes of a boy or the courageous convictions of a man?

“I’m sure you believe that m’Leodson, but I do not think anyone is ever really ready for the horrors that lurk in those accursed lands - if the tales are true. The Gods forsook them and all that dwelled there. Were there any other way I would suggest you take it,” said Coyn, with a tone of indifference.

“Were there any other way Coyn, I *would* take it - but the King has handed down the will of the Gods to us and we must do as asked. They have lit up the path, it is our duty to walk it in their light as best we can. You are not wrong though, the horrors beyond the river should only be faced by men.” Leodman Kildan stood up and

walked behind his son’s chair. Findan felt his father’s hands clasping his shoulders.

“My son, although he is not yet of age, has proved himself ready. The monsters we faced in the woods tore some of my best men limb from limb. Findan stood shoulder to shoulder with his kin the way only a man of the Kingdom of Gyldenorfia could.”

Leodman Kildan made his way back to his seat and slumped down into it, a look of pride rested upon his tired face. Findan nodded solemnly, closing his eyes; the screams of the small girl filled his mind, dragging him back to relive the memory of the beast crushing Yarik’s helmet between its teeth. He pushed the thoughts aside and focused on remembering the sound of his spear crunching into the side of the first monster, then later the cheers of the men that rang out once the pack leader fell.

“Yes, I am ready,” said Findan.

“Then with your father’s blessing, I will get ready for the Ritual of Becoming, my Leod,” said Dormund. Kildan nodded.

“Good, there also needs to be a funeral held for the men who fell in the woods. We burned the bodies and started them on the path of the last journey, but the families deserve their chance to say a proper farewell”, said Kildan; he looked over to Greyson’s empty chair and his fists clenched.

“When should I arrange the funeral?” asked Dormund.

“Carry out the Ritual of Becoming in the morning, the joint funeral shall be held at sundown.”

“Yes, my Leod. I will see to it”, Dormund replied.

Kildan turned to his steward.

“Coyn, if my son and I are to complete the task set for us by the King, I shall need at least fifty good men. Half of my best men are gone, dead or wounded. Send a message to the settlements from here to Gurord. Tell them to send their best men to the village of Lembwick, ready to join me on my journey beyond the river.”

“I will dispatch a rider to get the message to every holding between here and Gurord. Shall I send a message to the ranger from the south, asking him to come to court tomorrow at midday?”, said Coyn.

“No, that won’t be needed. I will visit him myself tomorrow after the Ritual of Becoming”.

Coyn nodded, “I will see to the rider then, my Leod”.

“Good, I think that covers everything”, said Kildan, standing up from his chair. Coyn and Dormund pushed back their chairs and stood, they each bowed before heading out the door to turn in for the night. They both had much work to do in the morning.

Once the two men had left, Kildan turned to his son.

“We have a long road still ahead of us. We had best make the most of this brief moment of calm before the true storm hits. Once it starts, we will not rest till our task is done.”

“Well, I’d best go catch up on some sleep then”, said Findan.

“Yes, just make sure you’re ready for the morning. We’ll meet in the courtyard before dawn.”

Kildan patted his son on the back, and the pair left the room to go get some much needed sleep.

When Findan awoke it was still dark outside. He sat up in his bed and groped around for his clothes. He had spent his whole life waiting for this day, the day when he finally became a man of Gyldenorfia. Findan finished getting dressed and eagerly set off down to the courtyard.

He rushed down the stairs, bouncing past a serving girl on his way down; he slowed as he reached the bottom, calming himself, putting aside some of his boyish excitement. Cool air hit the Leodson as he stepped out into the courtyard. His father sat atop his horse waiting; Dormund stood beside him, holding the reins of two horses, his own, and Findan's.

Without a word, Dormund offered the reins up to Findan. The young Leodson and Wyrdmun clambered up onto their horses, and the three riders set off through the gates; after a short while they came to a small lake surrounded by a grove of sycamore trees. The three dismounted and hitched their horses.

"Your belt, boy," said Dormund, reaching out with an open hand.

Findan unfastened his belt and wrapped it around the small sheath holding his knife, before handing it over to the Wyrdmun. Hushed words were spoken between Kildan and Dormund; the two men turned and waded into the lake until it came up to their waists.

"Step forward, son of Gyldenorfia. Meet us in the waters of Lunestria and be made whole."

Findan began slowly edging into the lake, the cold water biting into his legs. He didn't feel the reeds tangling around his feet till they almost tripped him over; Findan surged forward and struggled to keep his balance. He steadied himself, before carefully continuing to make his way to his father and Dormund.

"Let the waters wash over you, become a man," said Dormund, placing a hand on Findan's shoulder as he reached them.

Findan lent backwards and felt himself being slowly lowered into the lake. As the water reached his neck, the boy took a deep breath and plunged under. He felt the reeds being pushed aside as he sank to the bottom, the mud gripped him. The weight of the two hands on his shoulders pressed him deep into the lakebed. Findan heard the rush of the water as both his father and Dormund stood up, leaving him trapped in the mud. As the water began settling, he could see the two ghostly outlines looking down on him. Writhing as hard as he could, the young man tried to break free of the mud and reeds. Try as he might, nothing was working - fear and panic washed over him, he began to wonder if this lake would become his deathbed. He could feel his strength seeping away; he had to reach the surface, he had to breathe. It was no use. He was spent, he tried one last time to break free, it was no good. His body betrayed him, he felt his mouth opening and water being sucked deep into his chest. Why was he not strong enough to break free? Was he simply not ready to be a man? Would

it be better to die than face the shame of not becoming a man?

Just as the last of Findan's hope drained away into the mud, he saw two hands splashing down through the water; he felt them grabbing him tightly and pulling him upwards. He broke through the surface, wildly coughing and heaving. Kildan and Dormund each took one of his arms over their shoulder and carried him to the edge of the lake; they dropped him down and Findan continued coughing and spluttering. After a short while, he got to his feet and saw his father and the Wyrdmun watching him.

"Son, you have been born anew from the waters of Lunestria. Kneel and repeat after me.

I, Findan, son of Gyldenorfia,

Do hereby swear under the light of Solorin,

That I shall serve the rightful King, heir of Lodric.

I swear that I shall honour my forefathers, following the path that they set out for me.

I swear that I shall love my kin, guiding them along the right path.

I swear that I shall carry out my duty to those that come after me, laying out the next steps on the path for them.

All this I swear, before men and Gods."

As Findan finished his oath, Dormund walked over to his horse. The Wyrdmun pulled back the furs of his saddle and drew out a sheathed sword with a leather belt wrapped around it.

"You have given your oath as a man, and now, we must bind you as a man. Stand and accept your duty," said Dormund, looking down at Findan kneeling.

The young man got to his feet as the sheath was held before him, the Wyrdmun nodded. Findan wrapped his fingers around the hilt and drew out the sword. Holding it aloft, the sunlight showed the etching on the steel - a pattern of soft waves, rippling along the length of the blade. The Wyrdmun offered the scabbard, and the Leod carefully slid his new sword back into its sheath. Dormund unwrapped the belt and started passing it around Findan's waist.

"With this belt I bind you to your duty, may you think of your oath every morning when you put it on. With this sword, I grant you the right to guard your oaths - I pray you always have the might to do so. I now proclaim you, a man of Gyldenorfia."

Dormund tightened the belt and fastened it around Findan.

"As a man, your old title of Leodson is no longer fitting - henceforth you will be known as Findan, Mearcian of Gyldenorfia. Now son, every good sword needs a name," said Kildan.

"I think I shall call it Wulfbane," said Findan, resting his hand on the pommel of his new sword.

"A fine name," said Kildan, nodding.

Findan stood, lengthening and shortening the straps of his scabbard till he could draw the sword with ease.

"Well son, you're a man now. You take good care of that sword and it will take good care of you; given where our duties lie you'll likely need it soon enough." Kildan placed one hand on his son's shoulder and gave a firm handshake with his other. The Leodman felt pride

swelling in his chest, warring against fraught worry in his gut. His son had grown into a strong and brave man, but would it be enough to survive the road that lay ahead of them?

"I'll make sure it's oiled and sharpened after every fight," said the young Mearcian, nodding to his father.

"You do that son. Well, we'd best be on our way now. There is still much to set right before we head into the borderlands," said Kildan, guiding his son toward the horses.

"Come Dormund, have you started making ready for the casting off of the fallen?"

"I've sent word for some of the men from the families of the fallen to gather on the hill to the north of the keep after breakfast, so I'd best hurry on to meet them lest I be late," said Dormund, hurriedly setting off to get his horse.

"You go on back to the keep without us Dormund, my son and I have some business that must be attended to nearby," said Kildan. The priest nodded and rode on.

Kildan turned about and led Findan along a winding path. The pair passed through fields and paddocks; after riding for three or four miles they came across a field of sheep. Kildan rode into the field followed by Findan; a shepherd up on the hill that had been watching the flock, noticed them and had begun to make his way down to them. The young man nodded before the Leodmen.

"Afternoon m'leod, how might I be helping ya?," said the shepherd.

"We're looking for the ranger that returned from the borderlands, I know he lives nearby but if you could put me on the road to his door I'd be thankful," said Kildan.

"I see... You must be meaning Harod, a queer one that man. His farm is just over yonder hyll," said the shepherd, pointing westward with his crook. The Leodman and Mearcian looked on, seeing smoke drifting upward over the brow.

Kildan thanked the shepherd and went riding on, with Findan following behind. Once atop the hill, the two could see a large wooden hut nestled in the valley below. A woman and girl were playing out in front; as the woman spotted the riders, she pushed the girl into the home and then quickly turned back to watch them drawing nearer. Kildan and Findan slowly made their way through freshly sown fields till they reached the hut; they dismounted and were busy hitching their horses to a fencepost when a voice called out from behind them.

"What business have you on my lands?"

The two turned to face the voice. Findan spotted a slim man standing off to the side of the home, loosely holding a bow and hawkishly eying his father.

"Are you the Sudrac ranger, Harod - the man who came back from the lands beyond Thregar river?" asked Kildan.

Findan watched the man walk forward, seemingly looking through his father - he planted the end of his bow into the mud and rested upon it. The ranger turned to face the southern horizon, then back to Kildan. Harod looked the Leodman up and down before replying, "Aye, that were me in another life."

Kildan looked around at the house, then the valley, "You've built yourself a good life here, as a guest in my lands."

Harod nodded, "Aye m'leod, you've been a kind host and I've worked this land hard,"

"Then I've an offer for you. On order of the King I am to journey beyond the river; if you swear yourself to me and reliving your old life, I'll count you as one of my people and this land will pass on to any sons you might have," said Kildan.

Harod's head fell, "That is a kind offer m'leod, but I can't go back there. I'll tell you all I know of them lands, but there's nothing you could say or do to get me over that river. I'll up sticks and leave if that be your command, but I'll not go back there."

A pair of patchy-bearded young men came squeezing past the woman standing in the doorway with folded arms.

"It needn't come to that, give me your knowledge and you will be free to live out your days here. The land will only be taken back into the fiefdom of Wardia on your death, as is law; your sons will be able to buy it back or earn it by swearing themselves to the Leodman of Wardia, be that myself or my heir," said Kildan.

"A fair deal. So, why is the King sending you beyond the river - if you tell, it might be that I can give you more helpful guidance,"

"We are to find the sword of Lodric the Great. Legend says it was lost in the ruined capital city, after the great battle between Lodric and Steortan the World Eater," said Kildan.

"Aye, I know the tales; they were common among my folk, but the blade is not lost. No Sudracang ranger has seen it since the fall, but the songs we shared around our campfires told the story of the battle between Lodric and the World Eater. A temple of white stone was built over the battlefield; it stands at the heart of the city. I may be the only living man ever to have seen it." The ranger paused, lost in thought again.

"Won't be easy to get to, the crumbling city walls don't keep the monsters out, they keep 'em in. You'll need to take plenty of food with you, much of the city is burned ruins, there won't be any game to hunt" said the ranger, the man looked to be aging right before Findan and Kildan's eyes.

"What can you tell me of the monsters that lurk in those darkened lands?" asked Kildan, frowning his brow.

"Out in the wilds of the woods and plains you'll run into, Cearulves; hulking black wolven demons that'd burst into flames where you stick 'em. They were easy enough to deal with. The real terrors were the Hwiliks. They tend to stick closer to the old cities and villages, from far off you might take one for a man. If you didn't have your wits about you, it'd be the last mistake you make," said Harod, locking eyes with Kildan.

"We fought some black wolven beasts in the woods not far from here; a pack stalked us through the Bleuwoods for days. They waited for their leader to show up before they attacked us, the brute was three times the size of my horse. Those monsters killed some of my best men. I know you've said you won't cross the river, but the

demons have... The captain of my guard is laid up in a bed from the fighting. I need a man to lead a party of men into the Bleuwoods to clear them out," said Kildan.

The ranger looked to his family, and back to Kildan - his face hardened, "I'll clear out your woods."

Kildan nodded. The two young men edged closer; one spoke up, "Did you say ye were going to the land beyond the river m'leod?"

"Yes."

"Good, I'll come with you then," said the young man.

The ranger froze, Findan watched the man's eyes wincing in pain.

"Son, you are a man now, old enough to cut your own path - but please not that one," said Harod.

"And why not? The path was good enough for you. I heard what the Leod said, if I want this land to call my own I'll have to prove my loyalty to its Leod," said Harod's son.

The ranger sighed. "You know why lad, I tried to set out a different path for you, that land is full of pain and suffering. I don't want that life for you."

A defeated look spread across Harod's face; he dropped his head and whispered to himself, "I suppose I should'a seen this coming, you can take the man outta Sudracang, but you can't take the Sudracang out of the man".

Harod raised his head and walked up to his younger son. He placed his hand on the young man's shoulder, "If you're going into those lands, take this." The ranger unstrapped a dagger from his belt and put it into his son's hand. "This knife has tipped the scales of fate in my favour more oft than I can count. I'll pray it does the same for you."

The son held the knife as though it were the sword of Lodric himself. He carefully strapped the sheath to his own belt, then hugged his father tightly. "Thanks Dad. I'll bring it back when I'm done," he said with a smile.

"You better," said Harod.

The son stepped back and turned to his younger brother, "Well Briar, looks like you're about to become the man of the household for a while, take good care brother".

The two lads shook hands and then hugged, "You watch yourself out there Alasdair. Just remember everything Dad taught us, and I'm sure you'll come back whole," said Briar with a smile on his face.

"Alasdair, you can't go!" Findan watched a small, blond-haired girl rush past her mother's skirt and launch herself at Alasdair's legs.

"Eilidh, don't fret little one. These good men need help and I think I can lend it to them."

"I need your help though big brother. *They* have big swords and mail, they don't need you," the little girl said, with tears welling in her eyes.

"Don't cry Eilidh," said Alasdair in a soft tone. The young ranger bent down on one knee and wrapped his arms around her, "I will be back before autumn harvest, I swear."

The girl choked down her tears and managed to speak, "But that's ages away," she whimpered.

"It will be here sooner than you think! Tell you what, wherever I go, I'll make sure I look up to the moon and pray to the Goddess Lunestria for you. If you do the same for me, she will be the cord that binds us."

The little girl wiped away her tears and smiled, "I'll do that big brother, but you hurry back!" she said, hugging him even more tightly. He patted her on the head and she let go.

The woman stepped out of the doorway and approached Alasdair, "If this is what you want son, I'll pray to the gods and goddesses to bring you back to us whole," hugging him as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Thanks Mam, I have been praying to Solorin for a chance to prove myself for months. I was going to go try out for the Solstice Games, but this feels like the answer to my prayers," said Alasdair.

A proud smile broke out across the mother's face, she wiped away her tears and spoke, "I love you son, may Solorin guide you." She gave her son one last kiss on the cheek farewell, Alasdair then turned to face the Leodman of Wardia.

"I am ready to swear myself to you m'leod," said the young man.

Kildan looked the young man up and down, then turned to his father.

"And you?" asked Kildan looking at Harod.

"Aye" said the old ranger.

"Then come, take a knee before me," said Kildan.

Alasdair and his father did as asked. Kildan nodded, then turned to his son. "The honour of leading new men in their oaths belongs to a Leod's captain. With Greyson waylaid I need you to take his place; as a Mearcian you'll be leading men soon enough, son. Do you remember the words - are you ready to lead?"

"Yes Father, I'm ready," said Findan, nodding.

"Good, then lead the way," said the Leodman.

Findan turned to the ranger and his son, "Repeat after me."

"I swear, by Solorin the god of light, and Lunestria the goddess of night, that I will faithfully serve Leodman Kildan and his heirs. I will bear any duties that his Leodship sees fit and carry them out as best I can," said Findan, echoed by Alasdair and Harod.

"Rise, and take these as proof of your oaths." Kildan held out his hand and dropped a small ring into each of the men's palms. Alasdair looked at the ring, a strand of silver wrapped around a band of wood, the face of the ring bore the Leod's crest. Harod simply began fixing the ring to his belt.

"Thank you m'leod," said Alasdair, as he fixed his own.

"Have you horses to ride?" asked Kildan.

"No," said Harod.

"Right, make your way to my home at Falocay Keep, we ride for Gurord tomorrow morn. Show the guards at the gate your ring, and they will let you in and show you to the barracks," said Kildan, walking to Bruncwic.

Alasdair nodded. "I will see you bright and early in the morn, m'leod."

Harod watched as Kildan and Findan both climbed back into their saddles, and started up the hillside on their way home.

Amidst the Mist and Dew

Sam Rake



"Do these mounds ring a bell?" asked Ellie. She pulled the hay cart behind her companion, Lavinia.

"Stop harping in my ears," the elder woman replied. Her eyes wrinkled. "Be grateful."

"I am grateful, good Lavinia."

"This is only for the three nights, you know."

"I know."

"After, go find your own tomb. I'll need mine soon, heh, heh."

Ellie dragged her cart, with its burden, through a frosted pool of mud. Each step crunched thin ice, and she sank to her ankles.

"Dear Owen should have warned you before he choked," said Lavinia. She stood among three mounds, scratching her grey head and squinting. "I'd remember my own barrow with some forewarning."

The cart thumped and rattled as Ellie jerked it over a willow root. She drew up behind Lavinia. She said nothing. She ran a hand through her own hair; it came back damp and cold with sweat.

Lavinia sneered at Ellie's cart. "A whole box full of statues!" she mocked.

"The Earth Mother is never sated." Ellie spoke in weary monotone.

"But so many. Afraid for your husband's body?"

"I brought enough for all three nights."

As Ellie glanced at her burden, the old woman rubbed her knees. "My bones are rotten..."

Ellie caught the red sun in her eyes as it sank behind the barrows. "Lavinia," she said, pleading. "How much farther?"

"Hah! Why not come back tomorrow?"

"*And, if a body is not guarded for the first three nights of its death, The Earth Mother will send her vampires to drink its blood and damn its soul.*"

"Don't quote the sages at me," snapped Lavinia. "I'll be dead soon myself. I know litanies."

"I still need to set the statues." Ellie considered the rattling box on the cart. "Light the candle."

"Look inside that barrow," the old woman interrupted. She pointed a knobby finger at a hole in the base of the nearest mound. Ellie set her cart down, stepped ahead, and ducked into the low, dark tunnel. She emerged a second later.

"Anything inside?" Lavinia asked.

"It's empty."

The old woman nodded. "That was the barrow for a boy named Kharkov. I knew him when I was even younger than you are. But Kharkov's brother - his only watcher - fell asleep the third night. Heh, the vampires didn't even leave the bones."

"Good Lavinia, please..." Ellie begged.

"So much moaning! I remember where we are. Stop dawdling and bring that husband along. My barrow's this way."

Lavinia hobbled over the frosted grass. Ellie lifted the handles of her cart and followed quickly.

Ellie lifted the wood box from the cart. She carried it in her skinny, pale arms and set it with a thump beside the barrow's tunnel. Flipping the lid buckles, she reached

quickly into one of the box's compartments. Her left hand emerged with a long candle, marked into ten segments by nine charcoal lines. A tinderbox was in her right, rustling with char cloth and flints.

Ellie passed the items to Lavinia. "Set the candle by the table's head," Ellie instructed. "But don't light it until-"

"I know the rites." Lavinia's snappish grumble turned hollow and echoing as she bent into the tunnel. "Couldn't bring a spare light - making me knock my knees in the dark..."

Ellie spared a fretted glance west. The sun had sunk behind the mounds - the sky was an ocean of twilight.

Returning to the compartmented box, Ellie drew two statues of slightly-soft clay. They were in the same shape: a fat human, with folded legs, and fingers laced in their lap. The two statues had different faces.

"Blessed child, Rorey," she said, naming the statue in her left hand and setting it on one side of the tunnel. "Blessed child, Osborn." She set Osborn on the opposite side.

Ellie lifted the box and, half-bent, scurried into the black barrow.

The floor was cold stone. Ellie stopped at each step along the short passage, set the box down, and placed a statue or two. Each one faced the entrance. Each one had a name: "Newman", "Levin", "Godfrey".

As she positioned her fifth statue, Ellie paused. Even in the twilit tunnel she could tell she'd mushed the face with her thumb.

Ellie reached into the top right compartment. In the dark she grasped a knobby, smooth wooden handle. She drew her sculpting knife. She bent over the statue to carve quick eyeholes and a mouth.

As she scratched the tip across the face for the mouth, Ellie's wrist slipped. The knife swished along her thumb's outer knuckle skin. She felt the sharp sting. Ellie grimaced, but the cut wasn't deep. She set the statue down, set the knife back in the box, and held her thumb against her coarse shirt. "You'll have a little birthmark then," she said to the statue. "Blessed child, Tomnshend."

Privately, she thought, *'After all, it can only help.'*

Ellie entered the central chamber. The creeping, small outer light only made a vague shape of the space. It was a dome of mortared blocks, with a perfectly flat, stone floor. The ceiling curved to an eight-foot peak. Dead, piled leaves and forsaken tools made lumpy shadows against the walls. At the center of the room was a gritty, umber-colored slate.

Lavinia stood at the head of the slate. She'd set the candle and tinderbox on the floor. Ellie saw the old woman fold her arms under her breasts.

Ellie placed her dozen remaining clay humans near the entrance and around the base of the long stone.

Lavinia unfolded her arms and bent to peer outside. "The mist is forming," she said.

Ellie dropped the rest of her supplies beside the candle: mixing bowl, bag of clay, skin of precious ferrous water, sculpting knife.

"June's bones, it's dark," said Lavinia.

Ellie shot for the tunnel. As she started back outside - panting - she said, "Help me pull the body."

The lone candle set frail light within the barrow - a light so stable it seemed like yellow paint upon the body of Ellie's husband, Owen. The candle burned at the body's cloth-wrapped scalp, atop the slate. The short barrow tunnel ushered in cold spring air, and a nightjar's buzz.

Lavinia sat on a blanket against the wall, between a rusted shovel and a pile of bricks. Her fingers darned a shawl.

Ellie paced. She inspected the statues, stood over Owen, or stared outside.

The candle sank by three marks.

The moon grew massive and bright. Beyond the tunnel, beneath the mist, the crusty frosted grass glimmered like porcelain fireflies.

Lavinia started snoring.

The candle burnt past another mark. Another. Another. Ellie's eyes stung, but she kept awake.

The light spasmed. Ellie looked down the tunnel.

Limned in moonlight, the mist hung coldly still. Under the mist, some of the spiky, frozen grass had thawed. A thin streak of glossy wet blades ran under the mist, right up to the tunnel.

The candlelight sank slowly.

A crackle echoed into the barrow. Ellie's chin had dipped onto her chest, but now she sat upright. A second crackle, and the room went black.

The candle had expired.

A faint glow, however, crept in through the short tunnel. A glow of blue and gold.

Dawn.

Ellie sighed, relieved, exhausted. She sank to her palms and knees and crawled outside. Along the tunnel, nascent dawn lit her clay statues. All were untarnished.

But as Ellie emerged, and looked to either side, she saw that the two statues flanking the tunnel - Rorey and Osborn - had crumbled to powder.

A grey shaft of sunlight slanted through the western window of Ellie's hovel. The light struck her face where she lay on a fur by the hearth. Her face glowed pale. Her hair shone like oil, and contoured the dark lines under her eyes, which were closed.

The Starving Earth trembled, and woke Ellie. Her lids rose. From the sun's angle through the smoke stained window, she saw that noon had passed.

Ellie's eyes burned, but she held them open. She reached and felt the second, cold fur cushion beside her own.

Then Ellie stood, stretched, and walked outside.

Spring air licked against Ellie's face and hands. It wasn't cold now, but thin clouds left the sun as a pastel disk. Combined with the humidity, it promised a clammy night.

A hiss from the left turned Ellie's eyes.

Sidwell, her gander, came waddling to the threshold. His round beak was low, but unthreatening; his hissing was soft. Ellie reached down and stroked a finger down the coarse feathers of his spine.

Ellie set out. Sidwell followed.

The village hovels hunched like nesting birds amidst hills bristling with pine trees. A rough two dozen homes were there. Most were timber, with mossy wood shake roofs, and insulated with Earth-given mud. Ellie saw a lazy ribbon of smoke still trailing from one chimney; most of the night fires had burned out.

As they marched down a packed dirt lane Ellie and Sidwell passed silently by another villager, a farmer with a crooked nose named Rowland. Rowland wheeled his plow behind him, the blade raised. He was taking it to the eldest sage's hut, Ellie knew, to have it blessed with the Soil's permission to furrow.

With the scantest shared nod, Ellie and Rowland went their separate ways.

Ellie stopped along the road where it curved against the town's Scratch River. She stepped off the path, over the grass, down the hard dirt slope. The small creek choked through banks still frozen at their edge by winter's last chill.

Ellie cupped some of the cool water in her hands and splashed her face. For a moment, she breathed deeply.

Then Ellie caught the reflection of the dimmed sun on the ice.

Ellie quickly climbed back to the road.

On the village's opposite side she approached Lavinia's door. The pines loomed high against the western wall of the hut. Ellie knocked. There was no reply.

"Good Lavinia?" she called at the crack. "I thought we could go together and gather fallen lumber. Lavinia? I have an axe. We can make ourselves a fire tonight. Lavinia, are you home?"

Finally a croaking voice spoke within. "Go away."

"Please Lavinia. Owen must lie for two more nights."

"What stops him?"

"He-"

Lavinia's voice cut Ellie short. "Go alone. Why pester an old cripple?"

"You would make me sit in your barrow alone?"

With the mist and the body?"

Ellie called twice more, but Lavinia gave no reply. Finally the young woman looked back to the village. It was past noon. Only a few souls roamed the roads - none that Ellie knew well.

Beside her, Sidwell honked.

The wooden poles of her cart ripped from Ellie's hands as the right wheel broke through a frozen puddle. The cart tilted. She heard crashing, like breaking windows, as the whole load toppled over the side and shattered the crust.

"Cankers on a donkey," Ellie cursed, examining the mess. The firewood she'd gathered, the three new statues she'd molded and carved - all of it had sunken into the icy mud. The firewood was wet, the sculptures destroyed.

Sidwell waddled over and ducked his beak into the cool water.

Ellie looked to the sky, but stiffening clouds hid the sun. She only knew that noon had long passed.

Slipping off her shoes and wool socks, Ellie stepped into the puddle. The mud grasped her feet like dead fingers. She rolled up her sleeves and plunged in. Her hands finally closed around a smooth cylinder. She fished up the candle. Thankfully the wax hadn't snapped. She shook off the mud - the wick was fine, the charcoal marks visible.

Ellie squelched free and wiped her feet and hands on the grass. Gooseflesh quickened on her pale skin. She grabbed the cart poles and heaved. The ice and mud held it. She jerked, leaning with her small weight, but the wheel was stuck.

The common nightjars began their buzz in the dwarf pines on the barrows. For now, they were the only birds making song.

Ellie gave up. She picked up the candle and her socks and shoes. The rest of her supplies were at the barrow. She moved on through the mounds, quick and barefoot. Sidwell fanned his wings to keep pace.

The mist soon swallowed Ellie's haycart.

A bead of molten wax drizzled down the candle, washing the last charcoal mark. Ellie's thoughts ran with the wax, her eyes simmered like the wick.

One hour left.

Ellie leaned against the long edge of the body slate. She forced her hands to keep shaping the statue in her lap. At her hip, Sidwell slept.

A thought punctured Ellie's mind fog: the air was silent. No trilling nightjars.

Ellie looked up.

She couldn't see the other mounds, couldn't even see down the short tunnel. The mist pressed in like a solid grey wall, tinted orange by the candle.

It stopped at the outermost statue, Argyle.

And a voice seemed to stir the vapor:

"Ellie..."

Before the mist, Argyle wilted. The tunnel echoed a sputter. The clay figure's glossy surface turned matt, cracked, then the figure crumbled to powder - like an apple switching from ripe to rotten in a second.

Ellie shot upright. She woke Sidwell, who hissed, sputtered, flapped around the barrow. Ellie felt her head turn dizzy with rushing blood. She woozed.

The wall of mist pressed closer. Closer. It stopped before the second statue, Gideon.

Ellie snatched the unfinished figure from the floor. She started reshaping the legs, which had deformed when she dropped it. She reached and dragged over her mixing bowl of dry clay. She unstopped her skin of ferrous water. She poured a dollop into the bowl. She started kneading.

Gideon disintegrated. Over his clay the mist rolled. Orange shadows danced on the walls as the low candle fluttered.

Ellie's breath misted. Sidwell screeched, knocking over a shovel, churning dead leaves into the air, beating his wings. Ellie tried to focus. Shape the knee. Shape the foot. Focus.

Another hiss of collapsing earth; Lodowick. Another; Kinsey. Ellie couldn't breathe. The air seemed thick as water, and filled with noiseless chuckling.

Ellie looked up. She let the unfinished clay slide from her fingers. She watched the last statue, Duncan, fall to dust. The mist slipped into the hollow chamber. Ellie felt the damp on her cheeks.

And then the light went out.

Outside, faintly, a lone nightjar buzzed.

Slowly, the mist began to thin.

Ellie's eyelids dropped like stone-weighted bodies tossed in a lake. Her chin dipped. Her body told her to abandon her current sculpture, and sink into her soft fur bed.

She felt a tremor beneath her, the ground rumbling minutely.

Ellie leaned over a bucket she had filled from the Scratch River. She dunked her head. Icewater needles pricked her skin. She came up, gasping, cold, a little roused.

Dawn blushed beyond Ellie's hovel. Inside, it fell slantingly through the north window; an unobstructed cone glaring across the packed oil-dirt floor. Ellie watched dust motes dance in the pure light. She realized she was drooling, and wiped the corner of her lips with a cuff.

No wind creaked against the walls, and the birds of the morn lay unusually quiet. In the stillness of her home, for a moment, Ellie heard the voice again. The voice from the barrow.

"Ellie..."

Ellie focused on the statue.

The window light seemed to creep perceptibly towards Ellie. The slanting ray slid west to east across her floor, like a butcher's knife sliding down a suspended elk carcass.

Ellie set her third finished statue, David, to the side. She picked up the bowl of clay and the stoppered skin of precious ferrous water, got up, and went outside.

The pre-noon sun shed little warmth on Ellie's cheeks. No clouds obscured the sky, but the day seemed stiff, remote - as if the light were hurt. Ellie sat on her stoop to work. She scanned the clearing, glancing at Sidwell's pen, but the gander was not in sight.

Probably Sidwell was at the creek. Ellie wondered if she should go there herself. The cold running water was deep enough in spots that she could strip down and submerge completely in the current. A bath might wake her. And cold washing of that sort, Ellie felt, cleansed the mind as well as the body. One joined with the river water; memoryless for a time, freezing and thawing; like the wet grass of the barrow mounds.

Ellie looked up and realized that noon had come and gone. Beside her, four more statues sat with legs crossed. Seven statues total.

Ellie figured out she could keep her eyes open - her thoughts awake - by moving them around. She forced herself to look across the village every now and then. Folk went about their daily chores. Few acknowledged Ellie. They seemed to avoid her eyes.

Ellie knew she looked horrible. Owen would have scolded her: mud stains on her white ritual shirt, dirt under her fingernails, greasy hair, bloodshot eyes. "How," Owen would have shouted, "could she be so careless?"

Outside now, it was no longer the daylight cone which slid perceptibly, but shadows. The posts of the fences, the pines - each stretched a finger of shade, which turned about their bases like the blades of a mill.

Ellie smacked her face. A villager passing beside her home stopped, stared, then walked on.

"You must make surrogates," Ellie told herself. She carved a smile on her eighth sculpture. She named it Comor.

Reaching for a cloth to wipe her hands, Ellie realized she was still holding the knife. She dropped it. The cloth was white linen. She'd cut it from the same bolt used to wrap Owen's body. She thought about Owen, as she poured another dram of precious ferrous water into her mixing bowl. Owen sowing the field of yams behind the house. Owen lying in the dark barrow. Owen saying she'd made watery soup. Owen saying she'd wrapped his shroud too tight. Owen saying she'd left him alone on the clammy stone table...

Owen rose.

Ellie had been staring at the tunnel, and the eleven statues she set on guard. Comor. David. Humphrey. Howell. Jeremiah. Matson. Price. Simon. Stephen. Whitton. Willoughby. They sat facing the door. Each blessed child. Each surrogate. But now, where Ellie stood on the table's opposite side, the body blocked her view. She watched the body squirm in its shroud. That made sense to Ellie - Owen was claustrophobic.

Ellie picked up her shaping knife from beside the candle. She cut a deft slit between the right arm and torso. Owen tore free, shrugging off the wrap. He turned to her.

Owen's face did not look as if someone had smashed it to gore with a carpenter's hammer. He looked healthy, beard full, cheeks full, both flushed. His eyes were like two grease bubbles.

"Ellie..." Owen spoke her name in his usual coarse voice, "did you remember the dough for Reigentide?"

"It's the last of the grain, Owen," she answered softly. "I thought you'd want-"

"Slackwit. Why do you always undermine me before the elder sage?"

"I'm sorry," Ellie demurred.

"Ellie... we will have to dance on empty stomachs."

Owen slid his legs off the table and stood on the opposite side. The wrap fell away. He turned, they touched - his hands felt like iron in winter.

They circled the candlelit slate in rhythm.

The floor felt sticky under Ellie's feet. She glanced down in the midst of the dance. Her feet were bare, and the floor was covered in a glossy water sheet. Her face, reflected, was white like sawn ivory.

Ellie noticed the candle flickering. "Should we invoke the Reigen outside?" she asked? "So that-"

"Shh!" Owen's hiss cut Ellie's nerves. In a whisper he added, "Ellie... you'll draw the Starving Earth's ire."

They spun 'round the table. Faster. Faster. As the pace increased - their heads rocking side to side, their arms churning the air like spider legs - Owen's face relaxed.

And then, Ellie realized that there wasn't any music. She couldn't hear any sound at all. Not even nightjars.

Ellie bolted upright, her forehead cold where it had rested on the stone table. Owen's body lay on the table still, linen-wrapped. The candle guttered as if in a gale. Behind Ellie, Sidwell ran back and forth, hissing, panicking.

Ellie stared down the tunnel.

The wall of mist hung right up against the entrance, just before the eleven statues. Comor. David. Humphrey. Howell. Jeremiah. Matson. Price. Simon. Stephen. Whitton. Willoughby.

Comor... drained.

David... drained.

Humphrey, Howell, Jeremiah, Matson, Price, Simon, Stephen, Whitton, Willoughby...

Drained.

The mist gushed in. Ellie flung herself over Owen as the corpse twitched. The mist swelled over the table, nearly dousing the dancing candle. Air crashed. Dead leaves swirled. The body flopped like a beach fish.

"Stop," Ellie screamed. "Please!"

The mist bunched, eddied, crashed over Owen's body like waves. Ellie felt it trying to shove her. She snatched her sculpting knife, slashed a heavy vapor swell. The knife passed through air. The mist butted like a ram.

Ellie thought she saw forms of man behind the undulating mist. She thought she heard voices, incredibly light and high. Sidwell, hissing and flapping invisibly, made it impossible to tell.

The mist clumped for another strike.

Ellie dropped her knife. She plucked the skin of blessed ferrous water off the ground. As the mist lunged, Ellie tore the cork with her teeth. Flicking her wrist, swinging, Ellie poured the precious contents around the table.

The mist crashed... and stopped before the circle.

Over and over the mist crashed against the circle of blessed water. Like waves battering a vessel in a black ocean storm, the vapor sprayed and slid. But the water held stable on the perfectly flat floor.

Ellie watched, breathing heavy. Owen's body lay still beneath her. The candle warmed her cheeks.

The mist settled. Leaves swirled to the floor. Ellie saw only a mist shroud, concealing the barrow's walls and tunnel. Sidwell fell slowly silent.

Within the grey obscurity, the mist took blurry and undulating shapes. Shadow men. Vampires. That same breathless voice she'd imagined earlier seemed to murmur all around her now, from far, far below.

The silhouettes started circling around Ellie, Owen, and the table. Ellie recognized the synchronized twist of hips, how a shadow arm would flash like a horse whip. They were dancing the Reigen.

Searching the floor within the circle, Ellie spotted her mixing basin. It still held a little clay. Ellie picked it up and set it on the table beside her. She took her flask and poured - a last dreg of the ferrous water trickled into the bowl. Ellie carefully set the flask down. She began to knead and shape the clay. She kept glancing up, hoping for some glimpse of Sidwell.

Around Ellie the man-shapes locked arms. They bobbed their heads in unison, ducking sideways all at once. Every few steps they stopped and stomped. Ellie, sitting atop Owen's wrapped body, felt it shiver each time.

The statue took shape under Ellie's practiced fingers. First the chest, then the head and the smooth neck, then the folded legs. Ellie tried to ignore the murmuring beneath her, and the way the shadows danced even though the candle had stopped flickering, and now burned perfectly still. Ellie tried to think they were illusions.

Like Ellie and Owen in the dream, the shadows quickened. Twisting. Writhing.

The air felt cold as January midnight. Colder. Each of Ellie's shallow breaths formed a vapor cloud. She had the sudden insane urge to blow out the candle. She resisted.

The shapes stopped. Stock still.

Then they began jumping. Up-and-down the mist shades leapt. Rising in unison. Crashing together. Crash. Crash. Crash. Each crash made Owen tremble.

As they landed on the 20th jump, a rumble shook the barrow. The shadows stopped.

Ellie recognized an earthquake.

There came a sudden clap. Ellie leaned out and looked down.

A fissure split the perfectly flat floor. Ellie watched as the blessed ferrous water drained away - the dark, thin crack seemed to guzzle it.

Ellie heard the murmur rise clearer as the water disappeared.

"Ellie... surrender the blood."

The mist attacked. It slammed Ellie, knocking her off Owen. She broke her fall with the flat of her back. The stone floor tore the breath from her throat.

A white tornado flashed on the edge of Ellie's vision. She heard Sidwell, alive, hissing. His wing smacked her face as he passed.

Ellie forced herself onto her elbow. She rose - and so did Owen. The body lifted off the stone, she saw, on a congealed mist bubble.

"Please," Ellie gasped. "Earth, Vampires: wait for his soul to leave!" She got up, ran forward. She pressed on Owen's chest.

One of the mist figures shot forward. A shadow hand cuffed her shoulder. She felt the touch. Ellie stumbled back, and her foot caught on the mixing bowl. She slipped, fell, and the fissured floor again stole her breath. Pain flashed from her tailbone.

The shadows hardened. They closed in. They circled again, dancing right against the table. Ellie watched two shades stuff their hands right through Owen's wrapping. They lifted his body by the armpits. The corpse stood, limp, suspended by shadows. The linen wrapping around the legs tore, and Owen's mangled foot strode toward the tunnel.

Ellie spotted her shaping knife. She grabbed it, rose, ran. She took the blade between her hands and stabbed into one of the shadows.

The knife slid through empty air. The heavy black limb slapped her again, weighted like the kick of a mule. Ellie flew. She struck the wall beside the tunnel, bones juddering.

Sidwell stormed over. His beak found the crook of Ellie's arm. She grabbed and held him, while her face cracked with tears and sobs.

Owen's body took another stagger toward the tunnel. And another.

A trickle of crimson slid over Ellie's right eye. She touched her scalp, and her palm came down sticky with blood. She flicked it onto the stone.

The blood sizzled, evaporating. Owen stopped.

Ellie stared.

Owen stepped toward the exit.

Ellie grasped Sidwell tight and twisted the gander around. She brought the knife to his long neck. Sidwell screeched and writhed in terror. Ellie held the edge at his throat, trembling.

Two steps. Owen, surrounded by shadows burying shadows, stood before the tunnel. The Blood Starved Earth trembled.

Ellie threw Sidwell away. She swished the knife across the palm of her free hand. Pain like fire burned up her arm. She squeezed, then flung a ribbon of her blood. Owen swayed; Ellie's blood sizzled like an egg on a baking stone.

Ellie squeezed again, tossed another crimson spatter over the floor. The mist and the Starved Earth drank. Owen's body stood, shuddering.

Ellie flicked again. Blood sizzling. Body shuddering.

Flick. Sizzle. Shudder.

With a bang like a gunshot the candle flicked out.

Ellie breathed long and silent.

Owen's body fell with a thud. The shadows vanished. The earth stilled, the mist thinned.

Outside, night melted to a whip-poor-will's song.

The Harvest Supper

Thomas Hardy

Nell and the other maids danced their best
with the Scotch-Greys in the barn;
These had been asked to the harvest-feast;
Red shapes amid the corn.

Nell and the other maids sat in a row
Within the benched barn-nook;
Nell led the songs of long ago
She'd learnt from never a book.

She sang of the false Sir John of old,
The lover who witched to win,
And the parrot, and cage of glittering gold;
And the other maids joined in.

Then whispered to her a gallant Grey,
'Dear, sing that ballet again!
For a bonnier mouth in a bonnier way
Has sung not anywhen!'

As she loosed her lips anew there sighed
To Nell through the dark barn-door
The voice of her Love from the night outside,
Who was buried the month before:

'Oh Nell can you sing ballets there,
And I out here in the clay,
Of lovers false of yore, nor care
What you vowed to me one day!

'O can you dance with soldiers bold,
Who kiss when dancing's done,
Your little waist within their hold,
As ancient troth were none!'

She cried: 'My heart is pierced with a wound!
There's something outside the wall
That calls me forth to a greening mound:
I can sing no more at all!

'My old Love rises from the worms,
Just as he used to be,
And I must let gay gallants' arms
No more encircle me!'

They bore her home from the merry-making;
Bad dreams disturbed her bed:
'Nevermore will I dance and sing,'
Mourned Nell; 'and never wed!'

I Looked Up From My Writing

By Thomas Hardy

I looked up from my writing,
And gave a start to see,
As if rapt in my inditing,
The moon's full gaze on me.

Her meditative misty head
Was spectral in its air,
And I involuntarily said,
'What are you doing there?'

'Oh, I've been scanning pond and hole
And waterway hereabout
For the body of one with a sunken soul
Who has put his life-light out.

'Did you hear his frenzied tattle?
It was sorrow for his son
Who is slain in brutish battle,
Though he has injured none.

'And now I am curious to look
Into the blinkered mind
Of one who wants to write a book
In a world of such a kind.'

Her temper overwrought me,
And I edged to shun her view,
For I felt assured she thought me
One who should drown him too.

During Wind and Rain

By Thomas Hardy

They sing their dearest songs—
He, she, all of them—yea,
Treble and tenor and bass,
And one to play;
With the candles mooning each face. . . .
Ah, no; the years O!
How the sick leaves reel down in throngs!

They clear the creeping moss—
Elders and juniors—aye,
Making the pathways neat
And the garden gay;
And they build a shady seat. . . .
Ah, no; the years, the years,
See, the white storm-birds wing across.

They are blithely breakfasting all—
Men and maidens—yea,
Under the summer tree,
With a glimpse of the bay,
While pet fowl come to the knee. . . .
Ah, no; the years O!
And the rotten rose is ript from the wall.

They change to a high new house,
He, she, all of them—aye,
Clocks and carpets and chairs
On the lawn all day,
And brightest things that are theirs. . . .
Ah, no; the years, the years;
Down their carved names the rain-drop ploughs.

A Dance For Eternity

By Splendid Badger

I think I am awake,
But I feel asleep.
I can shout,
But I cannot sleep.
I must trust that in my soul, I will find peace.
By land beneath my feet,
With the pace to suit my needs,
And find the grace to fall.

As we all stumble,
And fumble,
Scars bundled,
And wrapped up on our backs.
Well, perhaps you'll get trapped?
When the deadwood snaps and the cracks appear,
Ruining the thin veneer and compromising what you
hold so dear.
Consumed by fear!
Swallowed whole by the dragon!
With doubt subsiding, to only creep nearer,
What is it you ask?
To make things look clearer.

Illumination is the key,
To battle the demons and escape from the beasts,
To shine a light at that which hides,
At that which hides, in deep recesses of the mind.
Use fire and flame, your voice if you're brave,
Fight the fight which never ends.
For once engaged, you cannot relent.

You see, for as time commenced and the brighter the
light became,
The demons fled, but the Shadows remained.

Over time, the shadow grew,
It relished in the newfound light,
although by night, the darkness did delight to
corrupt dreams and start fights.
For in dreamtime, what is its favorite hour,
To manipulate, and turn things sour.
Now the demons had fled,
Shadow has room to maneuver.
With the light still shining,
The Darkness grew closer.

"It's easy to neglect that which is uneasy,
Makes you feel queasy,
Vulnerable and needy.
But to accept all these will be hard indeed,
And to endeavor will last forever and bring you down
to your knees."

"Is it the future that you see, the things that turn you
sour?
Or will this be your final hour,
To play your tricks and make me cower?"

"Well, that depends on what is cared for more than
what is made,
For hand and fist can only exist with someone whole
of grain.
Heads and tails never fails, for they are never allowed
to love,
However, all is just feeling, some bad, some good."

Upon hearing the darkness, the light shone brighter,
Brighter than the sun.
More radiant than any star since time had *begun*.

You could feel the heat for miles, until suddenly,
It was gone; no substance to glisten on any surface,
Nothing left, bereft.
The darkness must have won.

So the light had burnt out,
Trying to dispel the words of shadow,
Forgetting the fact that both parts enact the whole,
To complete the balance, so narrow.
Darkness reigned supreme with the light
extinguished,
Now only left with sorrow and pain, with love and life
relinquished.
Swallowed whole by the dragon!
This time whilst downing a flagon,
Asking, "What does it mean to be free?"

"So the bottom you have reached,
Swam in shadow most cannot see,
Destroyed your own tapestry,
And made no effort to comfort me.
You used the light to cast me out,
Making me resentful, without a doubt.
Don't forget, I gave you a chance to listen, but you
chose to burn out in ignorance."

Then, with a flicker,
There was a glow.
Illumination had joined the show,
Sulking, feeling the fool.
So confident when the demons were gone,
Now tail between legs with darkness so strong.

For far too long, the light had not listened,
As all is well when you dwell in the rays.
No care when warm and things convenient,

With all the time to sacrifice through revelry and
delight.

Something may be gained,
From aware hearts and ears.
It takes courage to open Pandora's box and listen,
To that which does not glisten and gives rise to doubt
and fears.
And now the light returns,
Rising from the horizon,
Ready to accept an offer given in wisdom,
And to dispense with the reign of this tyrant.

Shadow had waited patiently, as it always had done.
The light grasped hands in the darkness tightly,
And they danced, leaped, and spun.

Eagle's Flight

Part 3

AR Duncan



After three days of marching in the calm summer weather, the war leaders left their men and ascended the tallest hill. Beneath the divine sun and surrounded by the circle of painted stones they called upon the gods for guidance. Returning to their men they brought with them auspicious news. Tomorrow the army was to be split. The majority of the men would continue along the coastal road and march straight for Dunbrig to begin the siege, with the seas and their ships at their side. A smaller band of men would fan out inland to protect the flank and reave any villages that had been left unguarded. Before the sun had time to rise, the five young men of Stratysca and one bondservant entered the gloom of the forest as members of the warband that stalked silently through choked valleys and claustrophobic undergrowth to the nearest village. They would be there at dawn.

The first the land knew of the feast she was due to receive was the thunder of the racing footsteps of men as they trampled across forest clearing to descended upon the village that was only beginning to wake from slumber. The cries and screams cracked across the land and sent in motion thick black winged clouds upon the sky. Beneath the sky dark with carrion and red with dawn, lay the green of the forest that burst forth with the frenzied horde of men and into which ran a scattered handful of screaming women attempting to outrun fate with their babes. The earth beneath was green, brown, and soon red. And so it was throughout the forest that morning.

Standing in the centre of the village, Anaerin watched the few fools who had remained get dragged from their houses and prostrated in the mud before the leader. A cowering child was ripped from her mother and a scream like no other that had been heard that morning brought winces to the faces of even the battle hardened. It was met with a slap and only husky sobbing remained. After all but one of the captives were suitably supplicated, one half delirious old woman insisted upon crying out, the men set about looking for any supplies they might scavenge.

Merddin picked through the straw that leaned against the squat whitewashed wall of house that set on the edge of the village square. A large building compared to the rest of the village. Looking through the window he could see into the circular one roomed dwelling with a fire still smouldering in the centre and a pot perched above bubbling quietly. In the corner were two low lying beds covered in straw. Keeping his hands busy he looked out across the mud covered village square. Anaerin, Hoc, and two experience warriors stood over four adult figures bent down in the mud and the handful of children that cowered beneath them. In this curiosity fuelled sweeping glance over the captives he made the mistake of catching the eye of the elderly lady. In the brief heartbeats their eyes made contact he could feel her vision run through him and empty him out ready for her piercing words. Hurriedly he turned from her and made attempts to focus his mind solely on the bale of straw in front of him but it was too late. She began to chuckle and raise a finger towards the young man.

“They watch you and curse you boy. The mother and child have fled but the father will return and by him the Gods will judge you”.

She was met with a swift slap to the face but she cackled all the same. Merddin tried to busy his mind and return in solely to his task but the mind of a young man is not so readily able to remove shock from his mind and Merddin was not the kind to jump straight to violence. Instead it would fester and the old woman knew it. A small wooden figurine lay in the dirt beneath the sack that Merddin moved. A crude carving in an offcut of birch wood but the abstraction of the form did not diminish the power of the wide smile and round eyes that sat atop a well worn body. Holding the doll he turned to face the woman and once more she cried out a curse, her face lined with the marks of age creasing in laughter at a joke only she had heard. Merddin, Anaerin, and Hoc all stood by as the other two guards finally grew tired of her games and threw her down to the mud. Merddin placed the figure atop the bare bed, hoping that its owner would return for it.

Turning from the captives that he could face no longer, Anaerin caught a blur of movement from the corner of his eye. From where he stood Anaerin could see down to the edge of the village where the tamed land grew steadily wilder until as they became subsumed by the forest. Walking down the track towards the edge of the village, his equipment was still unblemished, his mind reeled giddily as he thought of foes hidden round each corner and within each shadow. He readied himself for the fight until the slim figure of a young boy darted from behind a house and into Anaerin's line of sight then froze as he realised he was observed. There was twenty paces between the two when they locked eyes and in a flash a conversation was held without so much as the slightest parting of lips. For one as skilled as himself, the toss of the spear was guaranteed to hit, yet as the boy slowly backed away, the spear remained in Anaerin's hand, still shining in the morning sun. The boy disappeared into the undergrowth and Anaerin stared only at rustling bushes and waving branches. After the loot was divided the Stratyscans went on their way and left the village to grieve for her lost.

Over the next days they flitted across the landscape descending upon the scattered farmsteads and villages that covered the land but all were deserted. The warband's arrival had been made known to them. They looted what they could and moved onto the next. There were sporadic reports of foes gathering within the forest and even arrows were shot between the scouts of both sides but no contact was made between warbands. On the evening of the third day, at the foot of the gently sloping hill where the river of clear water ran lazily down to the coast and the was forest thin and undergrowth sparse, the warband was called to a halt and the men settled down for the night. A small cluster of fires grew up in the forest like blooming flowers and bathers the ancient trees and weary men in the subtle orange glow that grew as the sun sipped below the horizon. The men ate their food, shared in conversation with their brothers, then all but the guards began to fall to sleep. The boys had

chosen a spot on the far edge of the camp for their fire and now they all sat around none being willing to be the first to sleep.

"When we arrive at Dunbrig, if I call on you all at night fall to charge the walls and slay whoever lay within, would you follow me?"

The twins snorted in rejection to show their amusement. Merdinn and Talhearn took their time to measure their response but said no.

"And you Hoc?" Anaerin asked his servant directly.

"I would have too, otherwise it would not be right".

"You only say that because you don't believe that I would actually do it. We can all sit here and talk of undying loyalty or endless cynicism when it's in this distant hazy form and the dangers are only rocks out at sea but when you must get in the boat and sail the course yourself it is impossible to know how you'd act".

He turned to Hoc.

"I am not doubting you. We would both get in that boat".

"But for different reasons".

"Yes... different reasons".

The boys returned to staring at the leaping flames that cast their faces in streaks of orange and black. They looked round at one another in this dark night and attempted to read each other's faces. They had been at war for a week but still no engagement had been made. The anticipation kept the whirlwind of emotions churning inside each of them.

"Would our reasons be that different? I would go because it would be glorious and you would go because you were bound to follow. If you're following me are you not just in the pursuit of glory too? If each of the commandments I give and each of the actions I cause you to take leads us both to renown has my reasoning not become yours?"

"I follow you because you are who I am bound to. I would not go otherwise; I do not care for glory like you do. I am with you until you die or you release me from this oath".

"My death would serve us both then".

The fire continued to dance as the six boys sat in silence. Anaerin and his servant were entirely candid with one another but it was rare he would express it as such before the other boys. And this was not the first time Anaerin's morbid fascination had been displayed to them all but it was the first time it had been rendered in such stark terms.

"Glory does not always follow death. Your grandfather is remembered as glorious not because of death but because he succeeded. His body returned home with his men victorious. If we all charged the gates we would all certainly die and we would not be remembered honourable. You would be the fool who disobeyed his leaders and died for no gain and no reward".

"I suppose I would. But that's the risk of glory".

Anaerin and Hoc stared at one another with full honesty.

"Keep your glory. We plan on living" muttered Talisen.

"And for now, sleeping" added his brother as the two pulled their cloaks over themselves.

As the boys talked a light breeze from the coast wound up the river valley and into the campsite. As it carried on its northward journey it carried smoke from the fires up over the hill and down to the glen on the other side. It whispered its way through branches and leaves and round logs and trunks until it found a newly woken guard and stirred his senses. He watched his own cluster of fires and the sleeping men of Meildun but still he left his post and climbed through the darkness to the top of the hill loosing his own campsite behind him in the sheltered hollow. He looked down upon dotted fires below and approached as close as he dared without alerting the guards of this unexpected force but it was close enough to decide that they were undeniably Stratyscans. The enemy. He hastily returned to his camp and woke his comrades and after a brief counsel they gathered their arms and stalked silently into the darkness. The men of Stratysca slept peacefully unaware of their enemies until a guard at the edge of the camp let out a sudden yell before falling to the ground with an arrow in his neck.

The twins were first to wake but by the time they had found their weapons Anaerin was up and running towards the melee with shield and spear in hand. Hoc followed him only paces behind. Talhearn woke slowly as Merddin stood over the fire looking into every shadow, armed but not yet ready to commit to the fight. Slowly the two boys followed the cries of their brothers wary of every tree and the adversary that might jump out at them. From the darkness an arrow narrowly missed them and thudded into the tree behind them where it vigorously shook. They loosed a yell and broke into a run towards their comrades.

In the warm orange glow of the fire lit wood a line of the Stratyscan men that had rallied stood huddled behind shields. Arrows whistled out from the darkness and crashed into the wooden shields sending splinters flying into the faces of the spearmen behind. Occasional arrows found flesh instead of wood and the resulting noises and spray was far less pleasant for the second row. Joining with the flurry of arrows, screaming men ran from the darkness with bloodlust in their eyes. They descended upon the waiting men with vengeance and shield met shield in thunderous crack. The twins stood at one end of the second row, their spears thrusting back and forth bouncing from wood to metal to flesh that recoiled at the intrusion. Merddin and Talhearn stood further up the line grasping their spears as the only solid thing they knew. Each boy shook with adrenaline and none knew how long the two forces met.

Upon hearing the fight break out Anaerin gathered all he needed and run into the darkness of the forest. Hoc followed behind diligently. As they skulked the borders of the battlefield beyond the cruel glow of the blaze the youths took in the scale of the battle. Nearly half the men had been rallied together by two veterans and now they waited under a storm of arrows for the enemy to reveal himself. A small group of archers loosed arrow after arrow into the mass of the two boy's comrades only paces ahead. The master and slave looked to one another gave sighs that betrayed too much. Anaerin gripped his shield and spear and burst from behind cover with a startling

yell and dashed across the space between trees to set upon them. Hoc followed likewise with a cry of his own.

The five men barely had time to react before Anaerin's spear was through the first man's chest. Two of the men fled with a cry but the two that remained dropped their bows and pulled daggers from their belts. In unison they both leapt at Anaerin, snarling. He caught one with his spear but the other got his knife in behind his shield and Anaerin recoiled as the cruel tip flailed wildly, thirsting for his blood. It caught in his shirt and tore a short, sharp, cut but Hoc's spear put an end to its search and the two young men turned in the direction of the two that had fled and made chase.

They fell upon one as he tripped in the dark and like his other brothers in arms a spear was thrust through his chest. The other fleeing man stopped, turned with an arrow knocked, and loosed it with the resignation that he was not running from this fight. The arrow embedded itself in Hoc's shield but neither him nor Anaerin could be persuaded from their course. They saw little of the world but what they could see was displayed with a clarity they had never before experienced. Their spears in their hands and the form of their foes behind a tree. Their minds completed the picture of what must be done. He attempted to knock another arrow but saw the futility of the act and instead pulled his knife from his belt and braced himself for the impossible. The two Stratyscans were only paces away, bellowing violence and prepared to strike.

From the red mist that blocked all but the murderous passion flew a solitary arrow that cut through the fog and into Anaerin's shoulder. He twisted and fell taking Hoc with him. Their quarry was not one to waste the opportunity and leapt at them with iron fang in hand. Hoc barely had time to throw his shield in the path of the blade before it reached his master's body and even with his protection the blow was strong enough to punch through the wood and cut flesh. From the trees ran two more men ready to bring death upon the two newcomers.

When the arrow pierced flesh all the breath left Anaerin's lungs and the coolness of the night hit him with all the force the arrow had delivered. He was still not wholly aware of his surroundings when he collided with his servant and was only vaguely conscious of the shield that saved him but the second wound brought sensation rushing back and he knew of the caress of the same breeze that had first betrayed them all and led them to this point. He watched as Hoc pushed the first assailant off his master's body and beat him back with the spear butt then turned around to face the two charging men. The three foes fanned out to encircle him and though Hoc did his best to fight the three at once, it was not a fight he could win. One of the men grappled the spear from him and held it fast in his grip. Hoc let it go and pulled the knife from his belt and threw himself towards one of the men.

Anaerin ran through all his training in his mind, focussed every thought and muscle, and drew on the reserves that man does not know he possesses until they make themselves known regardless of his will. As one of

the men pinned Hoc, Anaerin leapt from the ground and using his remaining left arm frenetically thrust his spear at the man preparing the killing blow. Moments later one man lay on the forest floor dead. A second attempted to crawl away injured. And the third man fled into the trees and the other men of Meildun did likewise across the camp.

From the great melee in the centre of the camp the torrent of men finally dried up and with no reason the four newcomers could discern their foes began to retreat, dragging their wounded with them. The men of Stratysca were too tired to pursue. The sky was lightening and dawn would soon show the battlefield for what it was and with this new light the six young men would no longer see the world as they had the night before.



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May there always be work for your hands to do.
May your purse always hold a coin or two.
May the sun always shine upon your window pane.
May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain.
May the hand of a friend always be near to you and
May God fill your heart with gladness to cheer you.
(traditional Celtic blessing)