

# CORNCRAKE

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Alexander D'Albini

William Riverdale

Nathan CJ Hood

Charlotte Bronte

Splendid Badger

Luke Gilfedder

AR Duncan

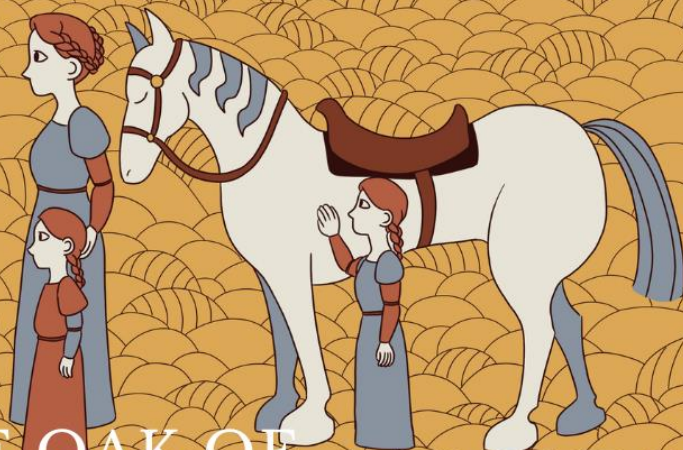
AR Green

Medugal

Si Smith

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ISSUE 15



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



Coming in to land with a delectable issue, we kick off with some information about Northumberland, ancient seat of kings, followed by a piece by Nathan CJ Hood about the *Lambton Worm*. This horrid creature slithers around the hills of the north country looking for livestock to nibble on, in much the way the worm used to.

*Die When I Say When* cries Luke Gilfedder with an extract, *Castle Rock*, from his soon to be released novel. William Riverdale is back burning witches with *The Girl and the Candlestick*. Medugal joins us for the first time with a west country tale, *The Portal*, light-hearted insanity incarnate. Alexander D'Albini bring us *A Jester's Tear*. D'Albini specialises in the English language and writes many of his stories around this theme.

AR Green's *A Song of Spring: A Sword Fit For a King* features in this issue with Po's great artwork for his fourth installment, *Casting Off*. AR Duncan too is back again with part 5 of *Eagle's Flight*, hopefully just as bloodthirsty as the last.

Our poetry this time around comprises a wistful selection from Charlotte Bronte, a delightfully rhymed piece by AR Green and another deep and thoughtful piece by Splendid Badger.

Si Smith is a long time supporter of the mag and in this issue we look at his art. He likes to portray landscapes and nature, and enjoys varied mediums.

## Shieldmaiden

Editor-in-Chief

*toilichte a leughadh*





# Northumberland

The coast of Northumberland stretches from the mouth of the Tyne to Berwick-upon-Tweed. This is one of the 'Middle Shires', which before King James's time was a lawless borderland facing Scotland, hence the huge number of castles and fortified houses and towers found across the Northumberland. The southern border of the county is the Tyne, an industrial river. Tynemouth is a major port, a busy industrial gateway, behind which is the Newcastle conurbation. North of the Tyne are a number of coastal towns but past Blyth is undisturbed rural Northumberland, where the coastline is generally low-lying and rocky, with numerous little bays. Bamburgh Castle sits perched on a precipitous rock; the first seat of the Northumbrian kings, though the castle itself is rather more recent. Opposite Bamburgh are the Farne Islands stretching into the North Sea, of which the largest and most famous is Lindisfarne or Holy Island, which was the first Christian missionary center in Northumbria. Inland the bulk of the county is a place of fells and dales amongst which the Cheviot Hills spread into Berwickshire. In complete contrast is Newcastle-upon-Tyne, one of the greatest cities of the kingdom. It sits on the north bank of the River Tyne.. It is an industrial city, built on coal. Berwick-upon-Tweed is at the northernmost reach of Northumberland. On the north bank of the Tweed, there is still debate about whether it belongs to Northumberland at all, or to Berwickshire, or whether it is a free burgh in neither. Hadrian's Wall crosses the south of Northumberland east to west, from Wallsend-on-Tyne out to the Solway coast in Cumberland. Towns are Alnwick, Berwick on Tweed, Haltwhistle, Hexham, Newbiggin-by-the-Sea, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Seaton Delaval, Tweedmouth, Tynemouth, Wallsend, Whitley Bay. Rivers are Tyne, Coquet, Rede, Aln. Of interest is Bamburgh Castle; Flodden Field battlefield; Hadrian's Wall; Newcastle city centre and quayside; Whitley Bay. County Flower: Bloody Crane's-bill

Northumberland's flag is of ancient origin. The Venerable Bede, England's first historian, records a banner of purple and gold which hung over the tomb of St Oswald, the 7th century king of Northumbria. The flag for this ancient kingdom is now generally regarded as having 8 alternate stripes of red and gold (yellow). Later, in medieval times, the colours were adopted by the first Earl of Northumberland. The modern version features these traditional "pales" of Northumberland interlocked to represent the stones of Hadrian's Wall which runs through the county. The registration of the Northumberland flag fulfils a 1,200-year tradition of the county's association with the colours red and gold.





# Dates of Importance

**May Day**, celebrated on **May 1st**, is a traditional festival marking the beginning of summer and has ancient origins in Europe. In England, it was abolished and its celebration banned by Puritan parliaments during the Interregnum but was reinstated with the restoration of Charles II in 1660. Traditions include the gathering of flowers and branches, such as hawthorn, sycamore, birch, and rowan trees, and the collection of May dew for luck and beauty. Other customs include choosing a bride, hiring a new servant, and taking community walks over common paths. In Cambridgeshire, young girls would go May Dolling, collecting pennies while going around villages with dressed dolls, a practice that persisted into the 1960s in Swaffham Prior. The early May bank holiday on the first Monday of May was created in 1978, but May Day itself is not a public holiday in England unless it falls on a Monday.

**Beltane (1 May)** celebrations in England include events like the one held at Thornborough Henge in North Yorkshire, which takes place on the first Sunday of May. For example, the 2024 celebration was on Sunday, May 5th, and featured free entry for day visitors, with the ceremony starting at 12 noon. Another notable celebration is held at Butser Ancient Farm, an open-air archaeology museum in Hampshire, England. They have been holding a Beltane festival since the 1980s, which combines historical reenactments with folk influences, featuring a May Queen and Green Man, living history displays, reenactor battles, demonstrations of traditional crafts, performances of folk music, and Celtic storytelling. The festival concludes with the burning of a 30-40 ft wickerman, with a new design each year. Additionally, the Beltane Fire Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland, while not in England, is a significant event that draws inspiration from Beltane traditions and is held annually on the night of April 30th. This festival involves fire dances, a procession by costumed performers, and the lighting of a bonfire.

**Saints Philip and James (May 1)** are celebrated in England, particularly within the Church of England. They share a feast day because their relics were brought to Rome together in early May. The Feast of Saints Philip and James, Apostles is observed, as evidenced by the Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle's acknowledgment of the feast day.

**The Feast of the English Martyrs** is celebrated on **May 4th** each year to commemorate the 40 Catholic lay and religious men and women who were martyred between 1535 and 1679 during the English Reformation.

**Rogation Days** in England are days of prayer and fasting observed by Christians, particularly in the Anglican tradition. These days are traditionally held on the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday preceding Ascension Thursday, which is celebrated 40 days after Easter Sunday. The major rogation is held on **April 25th**. In the Church of England, Rogation Sunday, the Sunday before the Rogation Days, is known as the Sixth Sunday of Easter. During these days, communities often hold processions and litany services to ask for God's blessing on agriculture and industry. In rural parishes, these traditions are often marked in partnership with local farmers to celebrate their work in God's world. While not widely celebrated in the modern Church of England, some areas still observe these traditions. The observance of Rogation Days has seen a revival in some Catholic communities since Pope John Paul II allowed them as a permitted, but not mandated, observance. For the year 2025, the minor rogation days will be observed on **May 26th, 27th, and 28th**.

**Whitsunday**, also known as Pentecost, was a significant cross-quarter day in the Regency period, particularly in England and Scotland. In England, it marked one of the four traditional quarter days used for legal and financial transactions, such as paying rents and hiring servants. In Scotland, Whitsunday was one of the quarter days, occurring on **May 15th**.

**Ascension Day** in England is a Christian holiday commemorating Jesus Christ's ascension into heaven, which occurred 40 days after Easter Sunday. It is not a public holiday in the UK. However, it is observed within churches and religious communities with special services, prayers, and sometimes processions. In England, Ascension Day is celebrated on the Thursday following the sixth Sunday of Easter, which in 2025 falls on **May 29**.



**St Dunstan (19th May)** is highly relevant to England, particularly in its religious and historical context. St Dunstan was Archbishop of Canterbury from 960 to 978 and was canonised soon after his death, becoming one of the most venerated saints in Anglo-Saxon England. He is associated with several churches and sites in England, including St Dunstan-in-the-East in London, which was originally built around 1100 and is now a public garden maintained by the City of London Corporation. Another notable site is St Dunstan-in-the-West, located on Fleet Street in London, which has a unique octagonal interior and a rich history dating back to the 10th century. Additionally, St Dunstan's College, an independent senior school, has also been named after him.

**St Bede the Venerable** is celebrated on **May 25th** in the Catholic Church and the Church of England. He is known for his extensive writings, including the "Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum," which is a primary source for early English history. His contributions to dating events from the time of Christ's birth (anno domini) also made him influential.

**St Augustine of Canterbury's feast day** is celebrated on **May 26** in England. St Augustine of Canterbury was extremely important to England as he is considered the "Apostle to the English" and played a crucial role in the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons. He was sent by Pope Gregory the Great in 597 to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, and his mission was successful in converting King Æthelberht of Kent and many of his subjects, including thousands who were baptized on Christmas Day 597. Augustine founded the first church in Canterbury and became the first Archbishop of Canterbury, establishing the see as the primatial seat of England, a position that has been maintained ever since. He also created 12 dioceses and established the abbey of St Peter and Paul (later rededicated to St Augustine), which became one of the most important Benedictine monasteries in medieval England. His efforts laid the foundation for the spread of Christianity throughout England and influenced the religious and cultural development of the country for centuries to come.

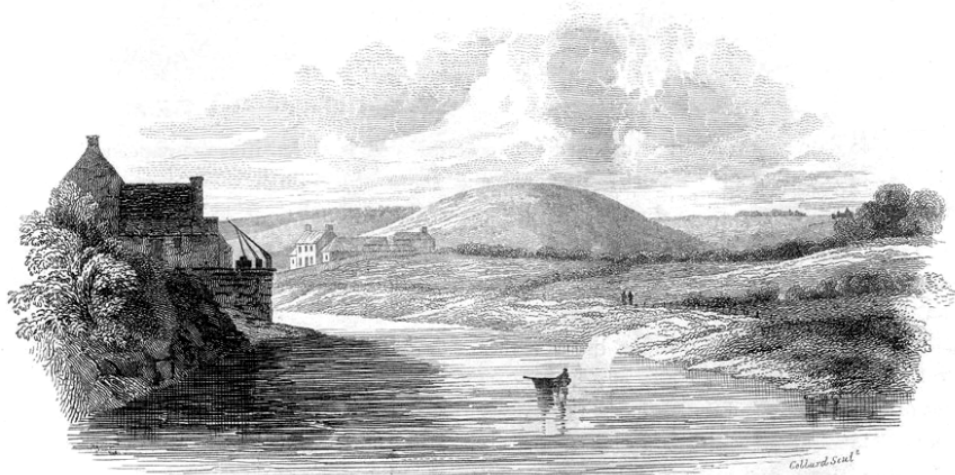




# Lambton Worm

## By Nathan CJ Hood

The British Isles are replete with tales of dragons. The most famous include the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf, the exploits of St George, and the Red Dragon that symbolises King Arthur, who descends from the Pendragon family. Yet there are many legends involving drakes and worms that have a local or regional character. There is the Stoor Worm whose corpse formed the Orkney and Shetland Isles; the Linton Worm, slain by a gallant Norman knight John de Somerville; the Dragon of Loschy Hill who would regenerate unless killed outright; the Sockburn Wyvern, killed by Sir John Conyers with a sword held in Durham Cathedral called the 'Conyers Falchion'; the Lymminster Knucker or water dragon. The dragons in these stories are not threats to the nation. They do not pose an existential danger to the British Isles or the world. In this respect, they differ from the epic dragons of mythology, the monsters like Nidhogg, Jormungandr or Python. Rather, they terrorise a local area, killing livestock and harassing local townsfolk. Nearby villagers are petrified by their poison breath, their crushing grip and their near impenetrable skin. It took brave and courageous characters, usually aspiring knights of Norman stock, to slay these menaces, thereby securing and legitimising their right to lordship over the dragon's territory. The Lambton Worm fits into this category of dragon tale. It revolves around John Lambton, the young heir to the Lambton estate in County Durham (from which the story originates). He decides to go fishing in the River Wear on a Sunday instead of going to church. While at the water, he receives a warning from an old man or witch that his decision to skive from his religious duties will come to no good. Lambton catches a small eel like creature which has a salamander's head, no bigger than a thumb. The young rascal declares that he has 'caught the devil' and throws him down a well. Many years pass and, as repentance for his rebellious youth, Lambton joins the crusades. Meanwhile, the eel creature has grown into a large and poisonous creature. Sheep, goats and cows go missing. The worm is so big that it has coiled itself around a local hill, now known as Worm Hill, seven times. It even begins to gorge on young children, snatching them from their beds as they sleep. Many villagers and knights try to kill the beast, but are easily disposed of by the giant monster. Even if they make a wound their efforts are in vain, for it just heals them. The best the old Lord of the Lambtons can do is placate the beast with a daily offering of cow's milk to the dragon, twenty gallons or so. The young John Lambton returns to find his home a wasteland. He hears of the worm and decides to confront it. The old man or witch tells John to wear armour covered with spear heads and to fight the worm in the River Wear. He is also informed that after killing the dragon John must kill the first thing he sees, or his family will be cursed for nine generations and will not die in their beds. John prepares accordingly: he builds spiked armour, he heads towards the Wear and he instructs his father to release a hunting hound when the worm is killed so that it will be the first creature John sees. Approaching the dragon, Lambton is wrapped within its coils. It pierces itself upon his spikes, thus mortally wounding and eventually killing the creature. Sadly, John's father, incredibly excited, runs out to celebrate with his son. John refuses to kill his father and the family is cursed, with several generations of Lambtons dying painful and horrible deaths, such as at the battle of Marston Moor in 1644. What distinguishes the Lambton Worm from similar stories is, besides its preservation in song, opera and literature, is its moral dimensions. Most tales involve a good knight slaying a horrible foe, thereby restoring the land and becoming king. It is riff on the chaoskamp motif, albeit on a smaller scale, of the warrior god slaying the demon and thus becoming king of the cosmos. There is a clear good and evil side and the conquest of the monstrous is taken as justification for the ascension to sovereignty. Not so in the Lambton Worm. John's sin of sabbath breaking – failing to observe the sabbath by attending church and abstaining from leisure activities – is the original cause for trouble. He is punished for his misdeeds by the emergence of the Worm, a symbol of how the introduction sin breaks social harmony and thereby sows the seeds of communal destruction, insofar as it is a rebellion against the Divine order. Left unchecked, such sins lead to the near annihilation of a people. The same idea is repeated at the end of the story when John, out of love for his father, fails to perform his duty, which results in his family being cursed. No doubt these priorities reflect religious influence upon the story. Nonetheless, the Lambton Worm is a fascinating and strange tale that offers and insight into the local, folk cultures of medieval Britain. For us it's a cautionary tale about what happens when we take the supernatural and morality lightly and the devastating consequences that result from failing to face a threat head on.



The Worm Hill.



One Sunday morn young Lambton went  
 A-fishing' in the Wear;  
 An' caught a fish upon he's heuk,  
 He thowt leuk't varry queer.  
 But whatt'n a kind of fish it was  
 Young Lambton cudden't tell.  
 He waddn't fash te carry'd hyem,  
 So he hoyed it doon a well.

Whisht! Lads, haad yor gobs,  
 An' Aa'll tell ye's aall an aaful story  
 Whisht! Lads, haad yor gobs,  
 An' Aa'll tell ye 'boot the worm.

Noo Lambton felt inclined te gan  
 An' fight i' foreign wars.  
 He joined a troop o' Knights that cared  
 For nowther woonds nor scars,  
 An' off he went te Palestine  
 Where queer things him befel,  
 An' varry seun forgat aboot  
 The queer worm i' the well.

Whisht! Lads, haad yor gobs,  
 An' Aa'll tell ye's aall an aaful story  
 Whisht! Lads, haad yor gobs,  
 An' Aa'll tell ye 'boot the worm.

But the worm got fat an' growed and' growed  
 An' growed an aaful size;  
 He'd greet big teeth, a greet big gob,  
 An' greet big goggle eyes.  
 An' when at neets he craaled aboot  
 te pick up bits o' news,  
 If he felt dry upon the road,  
 He milked a dozen coos.

Whisht! Lads, haad yor gobs,  
 An' Aa'll tell ye's aall an aaful story  
 Whisht! Lads, haad yor gobs,  
 An' Aa'll tell ye 'boot the worm.

This feorful worm wad often feed  
 On caalves an' lambs an' sheep,  
 An' swally little barins alive  
 When they laid doon te sleep.  
 An' when he'd eaten aall he cud  
 An' he had had he's fill,  
 He craaled away an' lapped he's tail  
 Seven times roond Pensher Hill.

Whisht! Lads, haad yor gobs,  
 An' Aa'll tell ye's aall an aaful story  
 Whisht! Lads, haad yor gobs,  
 An' Aa'll tell ye 'boot the worm.

The news of this maist aaful worm  
 An' his queer gannins on  
 Seun crossed the seas, gat te the ears  
 Ov brave and' bowld Sor John.  
 So hyem he cam an' caught the beast  
 An' cut 'im in twe haalves,  
 An' that seun stopped he's eatin' bairns,  
 An' sheep an' lambs and caalves.

Whisht! Lads, haad yor gobs,  
 An' Aa'll tell ye's aall an aaful story  
 Whisht! Lads, haad yor gobs,  
 An' Aa'll tell ye 'boot the worm.





# A Song of Spring: A Sword Fit For A King

## Part 4: Casting Off

AR Green





**Hulking gates swung open** as Kildan and Findan approached Falocay Keep. The noon sun shone high overhead as the stable boys rushed forward to take the horses of the Leodman and his son. The men slid out of their saddles, handed their reins to the stablehands, and began walking across the courtyard toward their towering wooden home.

"Go get some lunch, son. Take the afternoon to get yourself ready for the funeral tonight," said Kildan.

"Are you not coming for lunch too, Father?"

"No, I must meet with Coyn and Dormund. Preparations need to be looked over, and I need to visit the wounded to make sure they're being well seen to."

"If it helps lighten your load, I could see to the wounded after my lunch?"

"Thank you son, that would help. While you're in the kitchen, ask them to send up some food to my solar."

Findan nodded to his father. A guardsman pushed the heavy doors of the keep open as the two men approached. Findan headed on toward the kitchen, and Kildan caught one of the servants in the entry hall; he sent the young lad to find and bring Dormund and Coyn to his solar. The Leodman made his way up the winding staircase toward the third floor, far away from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the keep. Kildan entered the chamber - it was not as grand as the main hall, being smaller and more homely; he walked over to a large table in the middle of the room and sat himself at its head.

After a short while alone with his thoughts, Kildan looked up and watched Coyn slipping into the room; two servants followed him carrying platters of fresh fish and smoked ham, laying them on the table. Kildan sat brooding as Coyn pulled up a seat. The servants finished laying out the food, and Kildan thanked them as the door swung open a third time. A priest in white robes came gliding into the room - he held the door open behind him as the servants bowed and took their leave. After closing the door, the priest made his way to his seat.

"Let's keep this short. Coyn, did you get the message sent to Gurord?"

"Yes m'leod, the rider has been sent. Though in truth I'm not sure how many will answer the call. I looked over the maps and there is only really one small village on the road to Gurord."

"Well, they live next to the Borderlands, so what they lack in numbers I'm sure they'll make up for with stout heart. Dormund, is everything in order for tonight?"

"The pyre is built and the bellman has been sent to gather the local folks for the casting off of the dead."

"Very good Dormund."

Kildan turned back to Coyn; "I've another job for you tomorrow - a hunting party to drive the monsters that attacked us out of the Bleuwoods. With Greyson wounded and his sergeant dead, a ranger by the name of Harod has agreed to lead the party. I need you to help Greyson organise the men for his arrival."

"It will be done m'leod", said Coyn with a quick nod of his head.

"Good. Please eat, we can enjoy this food and then head over to speak with Greyson together. I want to make sure he was not hurt too badly, and I need him to name a new sergeant," said Kildan, pulling the leg off a roast chicken.

The three men dug into the food; they took their time, knowing it would be the closest thing to rest they would get on this day. After each had eaten their fill, they got up and followed each other down the twisting stairwell. Once they reached the courtyard, Kildan and Coyn bid farewell to Dormund - who went floating off toward a small pyre being built at the top of a hill. The two men crossed the yard and headed into the barracks. Torches mounted on the walls cast warm light on the empty beds; most of the wounded men had already been taken to their homes. Kildan stopped to speak with the last two men laid in bed, along with their families. Coyn waited, watching as the Leodman did his best to raise their spirits.

After seeing to the wounded, the two men set off toward a doorway at the end of the barracks. They entered a small armoury full of shields, weapons and shirts of mail, that neatly hung along the walls and on racks. As they approached Greyson's chambers at the end of the armoury, Coyn spoke up,

"I'll never understand why you spend so much time on lost causes my Leod, it makes no sense to me?"

Kildan turned to face his steward and answered in a biting tone,

"Those men followed me into battle, they put their fate into my hands. It is my duty to show them the path that will take them onto the halls of their forefathers. Recklessly leading them into harm's way is not a path to those halls. A good leader should always know the weight of what he asks of his men, and he should never ask anything of them which would not lead them onto glory".

"I fail to see how you can be blamed for the wounds that befell them. They knew what they were getting into when they swore their oaths to you."

"They swear an oath to me, they entrust me with their lives. If I treat them as little more than fodder, carelessly throwing their lives away, I will have failed in my duty to them."

"Well I don't see it that way."



"I know, that is why you are in charge of keeping numbers in order, not men."

"Gladly so," said Coyn.

The men walked without another word to Greyson's quarters, Kildan reached for the handle, opened the door and stepped in; they were hit with the smell of burning herbs. The captain's chamber felt smaller than it truly was, with the heads of many beasts mounted on the walls and a large oaken desk in one corner. A healer crouched over Greyson's bed dressing his wound with honey; once finished, the young woman bowed before the Leodman and left the room.

"How are you feeling, Greyson?"

With great effort, Greyson strained to prop himself up in his bed, "Like I got hit in the chest with a red hot iron, and fell down a well."

Kildan smirked and ran his fingers through his beard, "Suppose getting unhorsed by a cearulf will do that to a man."

"Cearulf you say? So that's what almost earned me a spot on the boat to my forefather's halls?", said the Captain, straining to stay upright in his bed.

"Yes, we found the ranger that survived his journey into the Borderlands - he told us of the many strange beasts that live there. He is to lead a hunt into the Bleuwoods, driving out any cearulves that linger there."

Greyson nodded, "Take it he didn't fancy a trip back over the river?"

"No, he made it quite clear he will never cross into those lands again. His son however, was keen to take his place."

"Well that's good, you're one less man down and the sooner those monsters are cleared out of the woods the better."

"Which brings us onto why I've brought Coyn here," said Kildan. Coyn stepped forward and gave a halfhearted smile.

"I need two things from you. Firstly, I need you to name a new sergeant, then I need you to come up with a list of the best men we have on hand. Those brave enough will follow me into the Borderlands, the rest will make up the hunting party of the ranger, Harod."

"Ahh, so he's going to be my legs?" said Greyson, nodding to Coyn with a frown.

"Yes, he's here to see that your orders are carried out while you are bedbound," said Kildan.

Coyn spoke up, "Don't worry, I'm just as unhappy about this whole arrangement as you are."

Greyson shrugged, "I guess you'll do for now, given my second-in-command is dead."

"Well, I'll leave you two to sort things out. If I don't have time to get back here in the morning, then goodbye. Take care of my folk while I am away."

Kildan patted Greyson on the shoulder. The injured man reached up, placing his hand on the Leodman's arm, "I'll take good care of them while you're away, and keep this one in line", he said, nodding at Coyn. "May Solorin guide you".

Coyn rolled his eyes at Greyson, and bowed to Kildan, "I'll do as you ask, my Leod".

Kildan made his way to the door as the two men looked out of the window, seemingly determined to say as little to each other as possible. The Leodman made his way out of the barracks and into the wide open courtyard. As he crossed the cobbles he spotted his wife and two daughters walking, holding hands, heading toward the entrance of the keep; he called out to them. Red hair flickered in the wind as his kin turned to face him. Kildan's daughters dropped their mother's hands and rushed toward their father, who took a knee and let the two girls jump up onto his shoulders. He stood up, spinning around on the spot as his daughters squealed and giggled, then carefully put them back down. He kissed each of them on the forehead, then stood to greet his wife. Lunella smiled warmly, she reached out as Kildan leant down and kissed her.

"Where were you three heading?" asked Kildan.

"We were just on our way to start getting ready for tonight."

"Ahh I see, I was just on my way to the hill to see how Dormund was getting on with building the bonfire, then I'm also going to head back to the keep and make myself ready."

"Well then, I'll see you shortly," said Lunella.

Kildan got down on one knee again, to speak to his daughters.

"Now, I want you to be good girls and give your mother no trouble getting ready. You have to be on your best behaviour tonight."

The girls nodded.

"Why do you have to go away again Daddy?" asked Florence.

"Yeah, why do you have to go? You've only just got back, can't you stay?" added Ella.

Kildan sighed then put on a smile for his daughters. "I'd love nothing more than to stay here, but Daddy swore to the King that he would do something very important for him."

"I wish you were the King, then you'd only ever have to do what you want Daddy," said Ella.



Kildan laughed, "It doesn't quite work like that, little one." He reached out and patted Ella on the head.

"Come along girls, we must be getting ready now," said Lunella, beginning to usher the children away. The two girls hugged their father once more, then took their mother by the hand.

Lunella smiled at Kildan as she left, but he could see the pain behind her eyes. He knew she didn't want him to leave again. Their talk from the night before was still pressing heavily on his mind. Lunella had told him that his people needed him, his family needed him and that she needed him. Yet the monsters he had faced in the Bleuwoods, so close to home, had convinced him the only way to save them all was to carry out the King's orders. The sight of his wife stood at the foot of their bed, with tears streaming down her face, haunted his thoughts. Kildan pushed those thoughts aside and headed towards the hill. A small boat sat at the foot of the hill, waiting to be placed atop the pyre for the ceremony.

Kildan found Dormund talking about the placement of some torches that were to be lit, once the sun had set, with one of the workers.

"It looks to be coming along very well Dormund. I'm sure the dead will be grateful for this noble means of passage into the halls of their ancestors."

"Yes, m'leod. It would be a treacherous thing to attempt to swim the dark waters that cleave our mortal realm and the realms of the spirits."

The work halted as a group of men carrying a body made their way down the dirt path. Stoney faced, Findan led the group to the boat and pointed to one of the seats. The men put the body on the rowers' seat then added wood to keep it upright. Findan spotted his father bowing his head as they passed. He left the men to continue piling wood around the body and headed over to his father.

"I see we have lost another - which of my men was it?" asked Kildan.

"Drefan, Father. He died in the morning. The family had been getting ready to send for Dormund, when I came to their door checking on the wounded as you asked. I thought it best to bring his body here for the funeral."

"You've done well, son," said Kildan.

"M'leods. The boat would do well to have a steerman," said Dormund to Findan.

"Yes Dormund, you're right. Have Drefan put in the steerman's seat."

The holyman then turned to the folk piling wood on the body, and told them to carry him to the steerboard. The men nodded and unstacked the wood, bearing the lifeless body to a seat at the back of the boat. One man took a length of twine and tied Drefan's hand to the rudder.

"How were the other men?" Kildan asked Findan.

"Ord is mending well, the fall from his horse broke his arm and it has been set by the healers."

"Good, may the Gods speed his healing. What of Eadguar?"

"The beasts badly mauled him, the healers were awed that he had not already succumbed to his wounds. They told the families that if the Gods do not see fit to take him in the next few nights, he may survive," said Findan, hope glinting in his eyes.

"Won't be long now till sunset," said Dormund, bowing his head as the first group of mourners were arriving.

"Best start lighting the torches then," said Kildan, nodding to the wooden stakes fencing in the field and hill.

The holyman bowed once more, making his way over to one of the torches, quietly whispering a prayer; the rag atop the pole burst into flames as his hand fell upon it. Dormund continued praying as he went from torch to torch, lighting them with the touch of his hand. Kildan and Findan headed back to the keep and met with his family. They had been waiting in the courtyard, along with a number of the keep's men and women. Lunella handed over a torch to Kildan, and the four family members stood behind the Leodman as he turned to face the people. Not a word was spoken. Kildan felt the weight of the dead hanging in the air, he lifted the torch and set off leading the crowd. He reached down, touching the leather pouch that held the rings he handed out to oathsworn men.

The sun dipped down below the far-off hills as Kildan led the way towards the funeral pyre. Many people had already gathered. The Leodman led his family onward and the crowd parted, making a path for him. As he neared the front, the kin of the fallen stood unyielding between their Leodman and the boat, with many eyes fixed on Kildan - some were teary and broken, others were hard and unflinching. One of the fathers of the dead stepped forward, Kildan felt the air growing hot and tight. The two men stood staring at each other for what felt like a lifetime; for a heartbeat, Kildan watched as the man looked to be reaching toward his sword. The man stopped and looked down, seeing a small boy tugging at his shirt; he reached down and took his hand. The man looked up at his Leodman and bowed his head, stepped back and took a knee before him. Kildan nodded to the father and walked by; the tightness melted away and the heat faded, leaving only sadness hanging in the air like a cold mist.

The other families nearby followed his lead, stepping back and kneeling as Kildan and his family passed. Dormund greeted them solemnly as they stopped before the boat. Kildan hugged Dormund and then turned to face the crowd.



"We have gathered here at the setting of the sun to say the last goodnight to our honourable dead. A great evil has awoken, and now stalks our lands; an evil the likes of which has not been seen since the times of Lodric the Great. The brave men, we are here to help guide to the halls of our forefathers, died fighting that very evil. I hold all of their mortal oaths fulfilled, and release them of their bonds."

Kildan turned to Findan and handed him his torch. The young Mearcian then led his father onto the boat. Once upon the deck, Kildan took a small bag from his belt and carefully pulled a wooden ring from it. He laid the wooden ring upon an empty oarsman's seat. He did this five times, one for each of the fallen. Kildan took the sixth ring and put it in the lap of the steerman who sat by the steerboard. With the last ring laid, his son handed him back the torch. The two Leodmen stepped off the boat.

"As I led these men in life, it is my duty to ensure their passage into the next world. Families of the fallen, help me bear your loved ones on the start of their last journey."

Many of the kin of the fallen stepped forward from the front of the crowd - they each walked alongside the boat, and on the count of three lifted it high onto their shoulders. The tied body of Drefan sat holding his rudder. As the men followed the Leodman's torch up the hill to the pyre, the boat rocked as if sailing over rough waters; once at the top, the men gently lowered it onto the pyre. Kildan nodded and the men stepped away, making their way back to their families.

In a booming voice, Kildan said, "Dormund - say the rights, and send this boat and its steersman onward. Let Solorin's light guide the brave dead across the great sea, that cleaves this world and the next. May the bonds they held in life burn bright, and take them on to their rightful seat."

The priest stepped forward and raised his arms.

"O' great Solorin, we beseech you to light the path of the fallen so that they might find their way to the halls of their forefathers."

Dormund began chanting in the tongues of the old world. As the chanting grew louder, smoke rose from the boat. The crowd joined in, and the dim glow hastily grew into a roaring fire. There was a mournful beauty in the voices of the crowd. Findan felt the chill of the evening air, mingled with song, washing over him and clashing with the heat coming off the burning pyre behind him.

Over the raging of the flames and chanting, Dormund shouted out,

"Let holy fire claim this flesh. O' Solorin, God of order and light, we now make these offerings as payment for the passage of our men into the lands of our forebears."

A young boy handed Dormund a bow and he threw it into the boat.

"Come family and friends and make your offerings, so that the God's blessed light will help guide your loved ones on the right path."

The boy then handed the priest a quiver of arrows. The head of each family stepped forward. In turn they each took an arrow and threw it into the fire. Findan stood watching the dark outlines of the men, carved out of the night by orange firelight. At the end of the line of men, Findan noticed the stablehand from their homecoming yesterday. He almost didn't recognise him, he looked to have aged ten years in a day. He stood with his back straight; as he threw his arrow into the fire, Findan could see a glint of steel in his eyes.

Dormund continued to lead the people in chants of the old tongue until the boat started crumbling in on itself. Kildan stepped forward and raised a hand, the chanting faded away and the fire started to die down.

"I have fulfilled my oath as Leodman to your kin, their fates are beyond us now. Without them standing guard, the kingdom and our people now lie in harm's way. The Gods granted the King visions of the darkness we faced in the Bleuwoods, not ten miles from here. That darkness is threatening to rise up and swallow us whole. Tomorrow morning, I will set out to ride into the heart of the darkness, beyond the River Thregar, to beat back the rising tide. As your Leodman, it is my duty to see justice done, against such evil all I can offer is revenge. Those of you that seek to claim justice, step forward and we will ride together beyond the river."

Findan watched the heads of the families taking in what his father had to say. None of them spoke a word, but their eyes burned as brightly as the fire had. The young stable boy at the end of the row clenched his fists. The boy, who had been looking at the ground, slowly raised his head and then went stepping forward till he was in front of all the other men.

"I, Nordon, son of Govannon, will take up my fathers spear to guard this kingdom and its people. I will have the justice you offer, my Leod."

By the time Nordon had finished speaking, a score more men from the crowd had stepped forward. They each gave their name and vowed to claim justice on behalf of their kin. Kildan weighed up the men - some were old grizzled veterans of the Oleric wars, others were young like Nordon and had scarcely seen more than a tavern brawl. Kildan knew he would need them all. The men knelt before him.

Kildan held up a wooden ring. "This is your oath. As you bind it to your belt, so too shall you be bound to me," he said, passing his eyes over each man.

"The wood of these rings is taken from the holy tree of my kin. By taking these rings you swear to follow me as

the voice of your forefathers. I will lead you on behalf of all our folk - those that were, those that are, and those that have yet to come. To take this oath is to give yourself to the glory of our people."

The men bowed their heads. Kildan stood before each of them and offered them a ring. One by one they swore their oath, took their ring and fixed it to their belt. Finally Kildan came to Nordon. The young man locked eyes with the Leodman and spoke the words of his binding loud and clear. He took the ring and tied it to his belt. Kildan froze, for a heartbeat he watched as Nordon's face blurred with the ghost of his father Govannon. Without a word the spirit fixed a ring of fire to his belt, walked over to the boat and passed into the smoke. Kildan took a step back and called out to the crowd.

"The sacrifice of your loved ones will not be forgotten, and shall not go unpaid. Let us go now to feast, and give thanks for the lives of the glorious dead. Those of you who have been brave enough to swear oaths, stepping into the boots left behind, shall eat and drink your fill at my table with my kin. Hail the forefathers and our glorious dead, long live the King."

The crowd shouted out, "Hail the forefathers, our glorious dead. Long live the King."

Kildan took up one of the torches from the ground and told his men to do the same. Findan took a torch from nearby, then joined his father at the front of the crowd. Once all his men had a torch in hand, they formed two ranks and led the crowd along the pathway back to the keep. As the crowd came filing into the courtyard, Kildan and Findan put their torches into nearby sconces. Slowly the Leodman and his son pushed the oaken doors of the great hall open. The smell of freshly cooked food came spilling out. As the father and son led the guests into their hall they were hit by a wall of warmth - at the heart of the room a fire was burning brightly. Two hundred or so of the mourners filled out the room, and a gentle din of chatter grew. People started piling food onto plates, as serving girls made their way filling cups and horns.

Once all the guests had found their way to a table, Kildan stood, raising a horn of mead, and the chatter died away. "Let us start with a toast to the fallen." The people stood up, holding their horns high.

"It is thanks to the deeds of brave fallen men, that tonight we all sleep with a little less fear in our hearts. To those that gave their life for our people, may their journey to our forefathers' halls be swift."

The hall shouted back: "To our fallen kin!". Hidden among the cheering, a few of the family of the dead quietly wiped away tears. Kildan lifted the horn to his mouth and drank deeply; the crowd followed. After the hall had finished drinking their toast, Findan spoke up:

"To those that have sworn to fill the boots of the fallen, may the Gods and our ancestors guide you. To tomorrow's heroes, may your swords stay sharp and your shields unbroken." Findan drank from his cup of mead; the sweet taste filling his mouth and warming his chest as he swallowed. He smiled, looking about the table as the newly sworn men shouted "to the heroes of tomorrow!", clacking their horns together and draining them. Serving girls hurriedly rushed around the tables filling up horns with more mead, as the toasts continued into the night. The food was the best Findan had eaten since leaving the capital - he had found the meat at Irenhand's hall a bit tougher than he cared for.

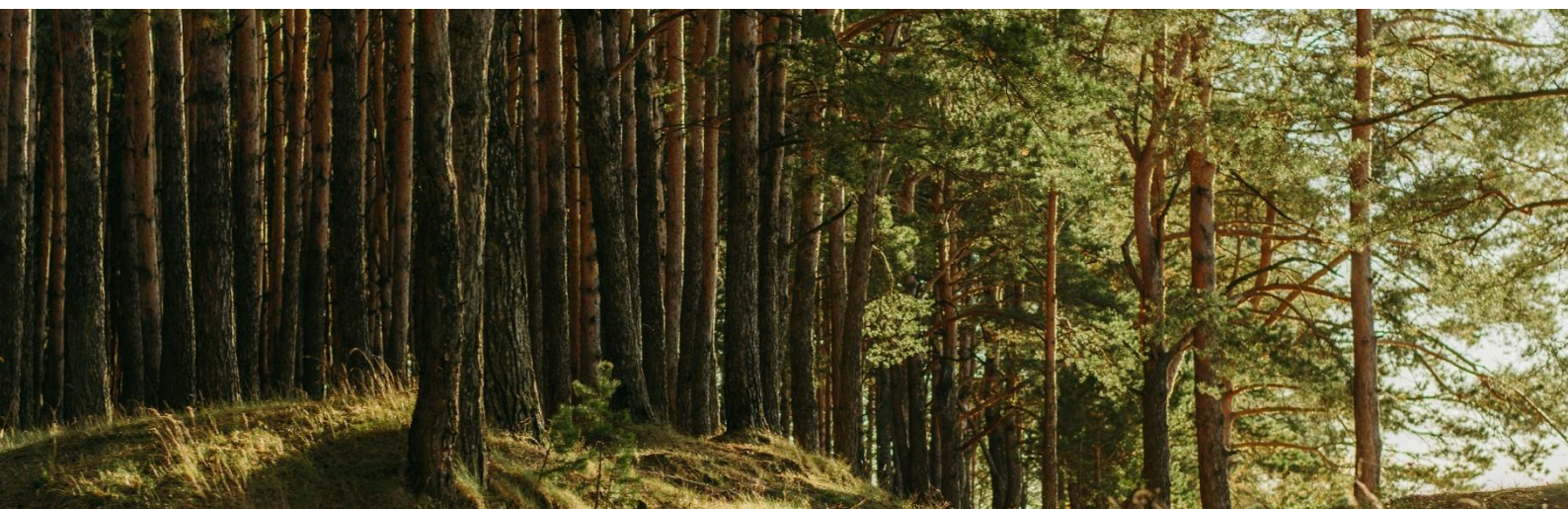
As the night wore on, Kildan told the newly sworn men to say their goodbyes to their families. They were to spend the night in the barracks, and in the morning Greyson would choose which party they were to join. Kildan only wanted the best men to go on with him to the Borderlands, the rest were to hunt the cearulves led by the ranger Harod. The men each nodded and slowly stood up from the head table of Kildan, and made their way to the table their families were seated at.

Slowly the hall began to thin out as people began leaving. After long, the only people still there were the families of those who had lost loved ones or sworn oaths. The jovial merry mood of the feast had slowly died out, until all that remained was grief. Quiet tears shared by families who huddled together; bound by their joint losses. More tears were shed when it came time for those sworn to the Leod to say their final farewells, and head to the barracks.

Weary, Kildan watched as the last guests made their way out of the keep and headed back to their homes. After they had slipped beyond the keep walls, he felt arms wrap around his waist. A sweet voice whispered in his ear,

"Come to bed my love, you have done all you can for these good people on this night, and you have a long road ahead of you. Let me help you take the weight off your feet for a while and set your mind at ease."

Kildan looked up to the stars then hugged his wife tightly. Lunella took Kildan by the hand and gently guided him up the stairs to their chamber.





# The Case of Lady Sannox

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



**The relations between** Douglas Stone and the notorious Lady Sannox were very well known both among the fashionable circles of which she was a brilliant member, and the scientific bodies which numbered him among their most illustrious confreres. There was naturally, therefore, a very widespread interest when it was announced one morning that the lady had absolutely and for ever taken the veil, and that the world would see her no more. When, at the very tail of this rumour, there came the assurance that the celebrated operating surgeon, the man of steel nerves, had been found in the morning by his valet, seated on one side of his bed, smiling pleasantly upon the universe, with both legs jammed into one side of his breeches and his great brain about as valuable as a cap full of porridge, the matter was strong enough to give quite a little thrill of interest to folk who had never hoped that their jaded nerves were capable of such a sensation.

Douglas Stone in his prime was one of the most remarkable men in England. Indeed, he could hardly be said to have ever reached his prime, for he was but nine-and-thirty at the time of this little incident. Those who knew him best were aware that famous as he was as a surgeon, he might have succeeded with even greater rapidity in any of a dozen lines of life. He could have cut his way to fame as a soldier, struggled to it as an explorer, bullied for it in the courts, or built it out of stone and iron as an engineer. He was born to be great, for he could plan what another man dare not do, and he could do what another man dare not plan. In surgery none could follow him. His nerve, his judgement, his intuition, were things apart. Again and again his knife cut away death, but grazed the very springs of life in doing it, until his assistants were as white as the patient. His energy, his audacity, his full-blooded self-confidence—does not the memory of them still linger to the south of Marylebone Road and the north of Oxford Street?

His vices were as magnificent as his virtues, and infinitely more picturesque. Large as was his income, and it was the third largest of all professional men in London, it was far beneath the luxury of his living. Deep in his complex nature lay a rich vein of sensualism, at the sport of which he placed all the prizes of his life. The eye, the ear, the touch, the palate, all were his masters. The bouquet of old vintages, the scent of rare exotics, the curves and tints of the daintiest potteries of Europe, it was to these that the quick-running stream of gold was transformed. And then there came his sudden mad passion for Lady Sannox, when a single interview with two challenging glances and a whispered word set him ablaze. She was the loveliest woman in London and the only one to him. He was one of the handsomest men in London, but not the only one to her. She had a liking for new experiences, and was gracious to most men who wooed her. It may have been cause or it may have been effect that Lord Sannox looked fifty, though he was but six-and-thirty.

He was a quiet, silent, neutral-tinted man, this lord, with thin lips and heavy eyelids, much given to gardening, and full of home-like habits. He had at one time been

fond of acting, had even rented a theatre in London, and on its boards had first seen Miss Marion Dawson, to whom he had offered his hand, his title, and the third of a county. Since his marriage his early hobby had become distasteful to him. Even in private theatricals it was no longer possible to persuade him to exercise the talent which he had often showed that he possessed. He was happier with a spud and a watering-can among his orchids and chrysanthemums.

It was quite an interesting problem whether he was absolutely devoid of sense, or miserably wanting in spirit. Did he know his lady's ways and condone them, or was he a mere blind, doting fool? It was a point to be discussed over the teacups in snug little drawing-rooms, or with the aid of a cigar in the bow windows of clubs. Bitter and plain were the comments among men upon his conduct. There was but one who had a good word to say for him, and he was the most silent member in the smoking-room. He had seen him break in a horse at the University, and it seemed to have left an impression upon his mind.

But when Douglas Stone became the favourite all doubts as to Lord Sannox's knowledge or ignorance were set for ever at rest. There was no subterfuge about Stone. In his high-handed, impetuous fashion, he set all caution and discretion at defiance. The scandal became notorious. A learned body intimated that his name had been struck from the list of its vice-presidents. Two friends implored him to consider his professional credit. He cursed them all three, and spent forty guineas on a bangle to take with him to the lady. He was at her house every evening, and she drove in his carriage in the afternoons. There was not an attempt on either side to conceal their relations; but there came at last a little incident to interrupt them.

It was a dismal winter's night, very cold and gusty, with the wind whooping in the chimneys and blustering against the window-panes. A thin spatter of rain tinkled on the glass with each fresh sough of the gale, drowning for the instant the dull gurgle and drip from the eaves. Douglas Stone had finished his dinner, and sat by his fire in the study, a glass of rich port upon the malachite table at his elbow. As he raised it to his lips, he held it up against the lamplight, and watched with the eye of a connoisseur the tiny scales of beeswing which floated in its rich ruby depths. The fire, as it spurted up, threw fitful lights upon his bald, clear-cut face, with its widely-opened grey eyes, its thick and yet firm lips, and the deep, square jaw, which had something Roman in its strength and its animalism. He smiled from time to time as he nestled back in his luxurious chair. Indeed, he had a right to feel well pleased, for, against the advice of six colleagues, he had performed an operation that day of which only two cases were on record, and the result had been brilliant beyond all expectation. No other man in London would have had the daring to plan, or the skill to execute, such a heroic measure.

But he had promised Lady Sannox to see her that evening and it was already half-past eight. His hand was



outstretched to the bell to order the carriage when he heard the dull thud of the knocker. An instant later there was the shuffling of feet in the hall, and the sharp closing of a door.

"A patient to see you, sir, in the consulting room," said the butler.

"About himself?"

"No, sir; I think he wants you to go out."

"It is too late," cried Douglas Stone peevishly. "I won't go."

"This is his card, sir."

The butler presented it upon the gold salver which had been given to his master by the wife of a Prime Minister.

"Hamil Ali, Smyrna.' Hum! The fellow is a Turk, I suppose."

"Yes, sir. He seems as if he came from abroad, sir. And he's in a terrible way."

"Tut, tut! I have an engagement. I must go somewhere else. But I'll see him. Show him in here, Pim."

A few moments later the butler swung open the door and ushered in a small and decrepit man, who walked with a bent back and with the forward push of the face and blink of the eyes which goes with extreme short sight. His face was swarthy, and his hair and beard of the deepest black. In one hand he held a turban of white muslin striped with red, in the other a small chamois-leather bag.

"Good evening," said Douglas Stone, when the butler had closed the door. "You speak English, I presume?"

"Yes, sir. I am from Asia Minor, but I speak English when I speak slow."

"You wanted me to go out, I understand?"

"Yes, sir. I wanted very much that you should see my wife."

"I could come in the morning, but I have an engagement which prevents me from seeing your wife tonight."

The Turk's answer was a singular one. He pulled the string which closed the mouth of the chamois-leather bag, and poured a flood of gold on to the table.

"There are one hundred pounds there," said he, "and I promise you that it will not take you an hour. I have a cab ready at the door."

Douglas Stone glanced at his watch. An hour would not make it too late to visit Lady Sannox. He had been there later. And the fee was an extraordinarily high one. He had been pressed by his creditors lately, and he could not afford to let such a chance pass. He would go.

"What is the case?" he asked.

"Oh, it is so sad a one! So sad a one! You have not, perhaps heard of the daggers of the Almohades?"

"Never."

"Ah, they are Eastern daggers of a great age and of a singular shape, with the hilt like what you call a stirrup. I am a curiosity dealer, you understand, and that is why I have come to England from Smyrna, but next week I go back once more. Many things I brought with me, and I have a few things left, but among them, to my sorrow, is one of these daggers."

"You will remember that I have an appointment, sir," said the surgeon, with some irritation; "pray confine yourself to the necessary details."

"You will see that it is necessary. Today my wife fell down in a faint in the room in which I keep my wares, and she cut her lower lip upon this cursed dagger of Almohades."

"I see," said Douglas Stone, rising. "And you wish me to dress the wound?"

"No, no, it is worse than that."

"What then?"

"These daggers are poisoned."

"Poisoned!"

"Yes, and there is no man, East or West, who can tell now what is the poison or what the cure. But all that is known I know, for my father was in this trade before me, and we have had much to do with these poisoned weapons."

"What are the symptoms?"

"Deep sleep, and death in thirty hours."

"And you say there is no cure. Why then should you pay me this considerable fee?"

"No drug can cure, but the knife may."

"And how?"

"The poison is slow of absorption. It remains for hours in the wound."

"Washing, then, might cleanse it?"

"No more than in a snake bite. It is too subtle and too deadly."

"Excision of the wound, then?"

"That is it. If it be on the finger, take the finger off. So said my father always. But think of where this wound is, and that it is my wife. It is dreadful!"

But familiarity with such grim matters may take the finer edge from a man's sympathy. To Douglas Stone this was already an interesting case, and he brushed aside as irrelevant the feeble objections of the husband.

"It appears to be that or nothing," said he brusquely. "It is better to lose a lip than a life."

"Ah, yes, I know that you are right. Well, well, it is kismet, and it must be faced. I have the cab, and you will come with me and do this thing."

Douglas Stone took his case of bistouries from a drawer, and placed it with a roll of bandage and a compress of lint in his pocket. He must waste no more time if he were to see Lady Sannox.

"I am ready," said he, pulling on his overcoat. "Will you take a glass of wine before you go out into this cold air?"

His visitor shrank away, with a protesting hand upraised.

"You forget that I am a Mussulman, and a true follower of the Prophet," said he. "But tell me what is the bottle of green glass which you have placed in your pocket?"

"It is chloroform."

"Ah, that also is forbidden to us. It is a spirit, and we make no use of such things."

"What! You would allow your wife to go through an operation without an anaesthetic?"

"Ah! she will feel nothing, poor soul. The deep sleep has already come on, which is the first working of the poison. And then I have given her of our Smyrna opium. Come, sir, for already an hour has passed."

As they stepped out into the darkness, a sheet of rain was driven in upon their faces, and the hall lamp, which dangled from the arm of a marble Caryatid, went out with a fluff. Pim, the butler, pushed the heavy door to, straining hard with his shoulder against the wind, while the two men groped their way towards the yellow glare which showed where the cab was waiting. An instant later they were rattling upon their journey.

"Is it far?" asked Douglas Stone.

"Oh, no. We have a very little quiet place off the Euston Road."

The surgeon pressed the spring of his repeater and listened to the little tings which told him the hour. It was a quarter past nine. He calculated the distances, and the short time which it would take him to perform so trivial an operation. He ought to reach Lady Sannox by ten o'clock. Through the fogged windows he saw the blurred gas lamps dancing past, with occasionally the broader glare of a shop front. The rain was pelting and rattling upon the leathern top of the carriage, and the wheels swashed as they rolled through puddle and mud. Opposite to him the white headgear of his companion gleamed faintly through the obscurity. The surgeon felt in his pockets and arranged his needles, his ligatures and his safety-pins, that no time might be wasted when they arrived. He chafed with impatience and drummed his foot upon the floor.

But the cab slowed down at last and pulled up. In an instant Douglas Stone was out, and the Smyrna merchant's toe was at his very heel.

"You can wait," said he to the driver.

It was a mean-looking house in a narrow and sordid street. The surgeon, who knew his London well, cast a swift glance into the shadows, but there was nothing

distinctive—no shop, no movement, nothing but a double line of dull, flat-faced houses, a double stretch of wet flagstones which gleamed in the lamplight, and a double rush of water in the gutters which swirled and gurgled towards the sewer gratings. The door which faced them was blotched and discoloured, and a faint light in the fan pane above, it served to show the dust and the grime which covered it. Above in one of the bedroom windows, there was a dull yellow glimmer. The merchant knocked loudly, and, as he turned his dark face towards the light, Douglas Stone could see that it was contracted with anxiety. A bolt was drawn, and an elderly woman with a taper stood in the doorway, shielding the thin flame with her gnarled hand.

"Is all well?" gasped the merchant.

"She is as you left her, sir."

"She has not spoken?"

"No, she is in a deep sleep."

The merchant closed the door, and Douglas Stone walked down the narrow passage, glancing about him in some surprise as he did so. There was no oil-cloth, no mat, no hat-rack. Deep grey dust and heavy festoons of cobwebs met his eyes everywhere. Following the old woman up the winding stair, his firm footfall echoed harshly through the silent house. There was no carpet.

The bedroom was on the second landing. Douglas Stone followed the old nurse into it, with the merchant at his heels. Here, at least, there was furniture and to spare. The floor was littered and the corners piled with Turkish cabinets, inlaid tables, coats of chain mail, strange pipes, and grotesque weapons. A single small lamp stood upon a bracket on the wall. Douglas Stone took it down, and picking his way among the lumber, walked over to a couch in the corner, on which lay a woman dressed in the Turkish fashion, with yashmak and veil. The lower part of the face was exposed, and the surgeon saw a jagged cut which zigzagged along the border of the under lip.

"You will forgive the yashmak," said the Turk. "You know our views about women in the East."

But the surgeon was not thinking about the yashmak. This was no longer a woman to him. It was a case. He stooped and examined the wound carefully.

"There are no signs of irritation," said he. "We might delay the operation until local symptoms develop."

The husband wrung his hands in uncontrollable agitation.

"Oh! sir, sir," he cried. "Do not trifle. You do not know. It is deadly. I know, and I give you my assurance that an operation is absolutely necessary. Only the knife can save her."

"And yet I am inclined to wait," said Douglas Stone.

"That is enough," the Turk cried, angrily. "Every minute is of importance, and I cannot stand here and see my



wife allowed to sink. It only remains for me to give you my thanks for having come, and to call in some other surgeon before it is too late."

Douglas Stone hesitated. To refund that hundred pounds was no pleasant matter. But of course if he left the case he must return the money. And if the Turk were right and the woman died, his position before a coroner might be an embarrassing one.

"You have had personal experience of this poison?" he asked.

"I have."

"And you assure me that an operation is needful."

"I swear it by all that I hold sacred."

"The disfigurement will be frightful."

"I can understand that the mouth will not be a pretty one to kiss."

Douglas Stone turned fiercely upon the man. The speech was a brutal one. But the Turk has his own fashion of talk and of thought, and there was no time for wrangling. Douglas Stone drew a bistoury from his case, opened it and felt the keen straight edge with his forefinger. Then he held the lamp closer to the bed. Two dark eyes were gazing up at him through the slit in the yashmak. They were all iris, and the pupil was hardly to be seen.

"You have given her a very heavy dose of opium."

"Yes, she has had a good dose."

He glanced again at the dark eyes which looked straight at his own. They were dull and lustreless, but, even as he gazed, a little shifting sparkle came into them, and the lips quivered.

"She is not absolutely unconscious," said he.

"Would it not be well to use the knife while it will be painless?"

The same thought had crossed the surgeon's mind. He grasped the wounded lip with his forceps, and with two swift cuts he took out a broad V-shaped piece. The woman sprang up on the couch with a dreadful gurgling scream. Her covering was torn from her face. It was a face that he knew. In spite of that protruding upper lip and that slobber of blood, it was a face that he knew. She kept on putting her hand up to the gap and screaming. Douglas Stone sat down at the foot of the couch with his knife and his forceps. The room was whirling round, and he had felt something go like a ripping seam behind his ear. A bystander would have said that his face was the more ghastly of the two. As in a dream, or as if he had been looking at something at the play, he was conscious that the Turk's hair and beard lay upon the table, and that Lord Sannox was leaning against the wall with his hand to his side, laughing silently. The screams had died away now, and the dreadful head had dropped back again

upon the pillow, but Douglas Stone still sat motionless, and Lord Sannox still chuckled quietly to himself.

"It was really very necessary for Marion, this operation," said he, "not physically, but morally, you know, morally."

Douglas Stone stooped for yards and began to play with the fringe of the coverlet. His knife tinkled down upon the ground, but he still held the forceps and something more.

"I had long intended to make a little example," said Lord Sannox, suavely. "Your note of Wednesday miscarried, and I have it here in my pocket-book. I took some pains in carrying out my idea. The wound, by the way, was from nothing more dangerous than my signet ring."

He glanced keenly at his silent companion, and cocked the small revolver which he held in his coat pocket. But Douglas Stone was still picking at the coverlet.

"You see you have kept your appointment after all," said Lord Sannox.

And at that Douglas Stone began to laugh. He laughed long and loudly. But Lord Sannox did not laugh now. Something like fear sharpened and hardened his features. He walked from the room, and he walked on tiptoe. The old woman was waiting outside.

"Attend to your mistress when she awakes," said Lord Sannox.

Then he went down to the street. The cab was at the door, and the driver raised his hand to his hat.

"John," said Lord Sannox, "you will take the doctor home first. He will want leading downstairs, I think. Tell his butler that he has been taken ill at a case."

"Very good, sir."

"Then you can take Lady Sannox home."

"And how about yourself, sir?"

"Oh, my address for the next few months will be Hotel di Roma, Venice. Just see that the letters are sent on. And tell Stevens to exhibit all the purple chrysanthemums next Monday, and to wire me the result."



# The Girl and the Candlestick

William Riverdale





**Once upon a time**, at the edge of an old ancient forest, there lived a little girl with her father. The girl was very pretty and was very much loved by her father. They both lived in a beautiful cottage and at night time if you happened upon the forest, you would be able to see the bright and warm glow of the candlestick through the window and the grey wisps of smoke dancing atop their chimney.

The girl and her father were the happiest they could be and lacked nothing. All the seasons were dear to them, every hour beloved. However, in the heart of that ancient forest, in the gloom where the shafts of the sun could not pierce the deadened boughs and the silver of the moon never shone on the barren glade, there lived an evil, wicked witch. She lived in a dark, dismal hut and cooked her food by conjuring a magical black fire that burned but produced no flame. She did this because she hated the light.

But much to her dismay, there was one light in her life. It was the glow of the candle of the cottage that was able to reach the witch's hut. This angered the witch and she poured power into her eyes in order to see who were the inhabitants in the cottage. She found out about the little girl and her father. and when she beheld the beauty of the girl, she hated it and coveted it for herself.

"I must have it for myself!" she said. "But I must wait for the father to leave first."

One day, the father had to go and collect firewood. Before he went he called the girl and told her not to open the door for anybody except when he came back home. The girl said that she wouldn't open the door for strangers. The father then took a candle, lit it, and placed it above the beam of the door. "Protect my daughter from any harm that may come to her," he whispered to the candle and was off.

When the witch saw the father leave, she used her magic to disguise herself as a tailor, conjured up a beautiful dress, and made her way to the cottage. She reached outside the door, knocked thrice, and said: Little girl, pretty girl, how do you do? Would you like a pretty dress to go with you?

The girl looked out of the window at the noise. When the girl saw the dress that sparkled like the stars at night, she found it very fetching. Forgetting her father's warning, she opened the door. But as soon as the witch stepped in, the candle above the door bent itself and dropped hot wax upon the witch's head. The witch howled in pain and ran away.

The little girl reprimanded the candle. "Oh, you horrid candle! Now I won't have that pretty dress."

The candle replied, "But you will still have your beauty and yourself."

The witch, still adamant to get the girl's beauty, used her magic again, and disguised herself now as a jeweller. She again went to the girl's house, knocked

thrice at the door, and said: Little girl, pretty girl, how do you do? Would you like a pretty ring to go with you?

The girl saw how pretty the ring was and how it glowed like a little sun, and she opened the door. But as soon as the witch stepped in, the candle bent itself and dropped hot wax upon her head and sent the witch shrieking away.

The little girl again reprimanded the candle. "Oh, you horrid candle. Now I won't have that pretty ring."

But the candle replied, "But you will still have your beauty and yourself."

The witch refused to give up. She again disguised herself with magic, now as a vendor and knocked thrice at the cottage again. Little girl, pretty girl, how do you do? Would you like this cream which will make you pretty two times two?

This time the girl blew out the candle, put it in her pocket, and opened the door. The witch stepped in and gave the girl the cream to try. The cream in the jar looked like a beautiful bright moon. The girl put some upon her face and immediately fell asleep. The witch then grabbed the girl and took her back to her hut deep into the forest.

When the girl woke up, she was horrified to find herself in the hut and the ugly witch, who had shed off her disguise, standing in front of her.

"Now I will cut you, cook you, and eat you. Then I will become the most beautiful," the witch said.

The girl was frightened but kept her wits. She remembered the candle in her pocket. She begged the witch to let her pray one last time to God before she was to be cut, cooked, and eaten. The witch at first scoffed at her but as the girl continued begging, she finally gave in.

"Alright, stop your sniffing. I can't stand the sound of children," the witch said.

"At least give me a little bit of fire so I can light this incense to help me pray," the girl requested.

The witch snapped her fingers, and a black fire erupted above her fingertips. The girl quickly took out the candle and lit it up. The candle's bright golden-reddish flame jumped up and grew large like a bonfire. The hut was set ablaze, as if the darkness was torn away from the air. The witch, blinded by the fire, was unable to see the flame leaping towards her. It gobbled her up, and she burned to death.

The girl escaped from the hut which was now an inferno. Guided by the candle's light, she made her way back to the cottage where her worried father was looking around for her.

She embraced her father and told him all that had happened. She promised him that she would always heed his warnings from now on and would never open the door for strangers again. And as far as anyone knows, they are living there still to this day.

# A Jester's Tear

Alexander D'Albini

A forlorn man stood by the closed chamber door. Cold winter air curled around his legs. Obvious tracks of dried tears smeared his rugged cheeks. His head dropped down like an overworked donkey at the end of a gruelling day. In his chest, his heart pounded. His hand, which was clenched into a loose fist, hung a few inches from the door, anticipating to knock.

Slightly, he lifted his head and saw the door decorated with the grain of the wood. Entranced, he could see the interweaving lines. The grooves and ridges. The knots and joins.

A memory formed in his mind. He recalled the Paradise Woods, where he first met his dear lady. They were children running amongst the trees, hiding and seeking. They laughed as they rolled down the daffodil encrusted mounds. They pretended at knights and maidens, played as rival kings, and he made her giggle with deep genuine belly laughs.

Even though she was of royal descent, and his father was the court jester, they became close friends. When they were together, this difference was of little consequence. Their favourite game involved a gargoyle statue in the centre of the garden. Each took a turn to hide behind the grotesque image. The other would stare into its eyes and ask questions. The hidden player would answer in a guttural voice. Sometimes truthful and at times with an outright ridiculous lie. Being the son of the jester, he always gave a comic response.

As they grew older, he wanted to ask one question. But he became mute whenever it formed around of his tongue. That one question would have changed the script.

Coming back to himself in the castle, he bit his cheek. Why could he not have asked that simple question, 'Do you love me?'

Surely, she would have smiled and embraced him. But more than likely, he would have been removed from her. No longer allowed to spend any more time, alone in her presence.

Dropping his hand down by his side, he shuffled on his feet and began to imagine tomorrow. He would be in the congregation. She would enter the castle chapel to a bright fanfare. Slowly, walking down the aisle into an atmosphere of admiration.

As she passed, she would smile at him. Clearly, with love in her heart. He would act his part, and smile in return. Though it was a martyr's one, cruelly carved on his face.

As soon as she said 'I do' to the prince, the covenant was made and his dreams broken. Inside, he would begin screaming in pain, but then a rising tide of silence would cover him, drowning his emotions.

Feeling for his pocket, he pulled out a piece of paper. One edge was ripped, torn from his diary. It was a love poem he'd written to her many years ago, but was never sent. He read the words and mouthed them to himself. Almost like repeating a spell, enchanting the verse. Hoping it might catch her heart and she would choose him over the groom.

He folded the paper and knelt down on one knee, preparing to pass the note into her bedroom chamber, placing it underneath the door. But his hand refrained.

He recalled the words of his father. 'In life, if we leave the script, we take great risks. If we then fail, we lose everything. If we succeed, we simply enter another script. So my advice is to stay within the script you know.'

A myriad of thoughts on the future rippled out in front of him. His mind overwhelmed by a cacophony of unadvised actions. Decisions which all led to unrequited emotions or abject exile.

The jester stood and emotionlessly screwed up the paper poem in his hand. He recalled another piece of wisdom, 'People don't like a jester who cry.'

Holding back hot tears, he walked towards the wing of the castle, where he slept. Waiting for tomorrow's celebrations.



# A Beacon for All

*AR Green*

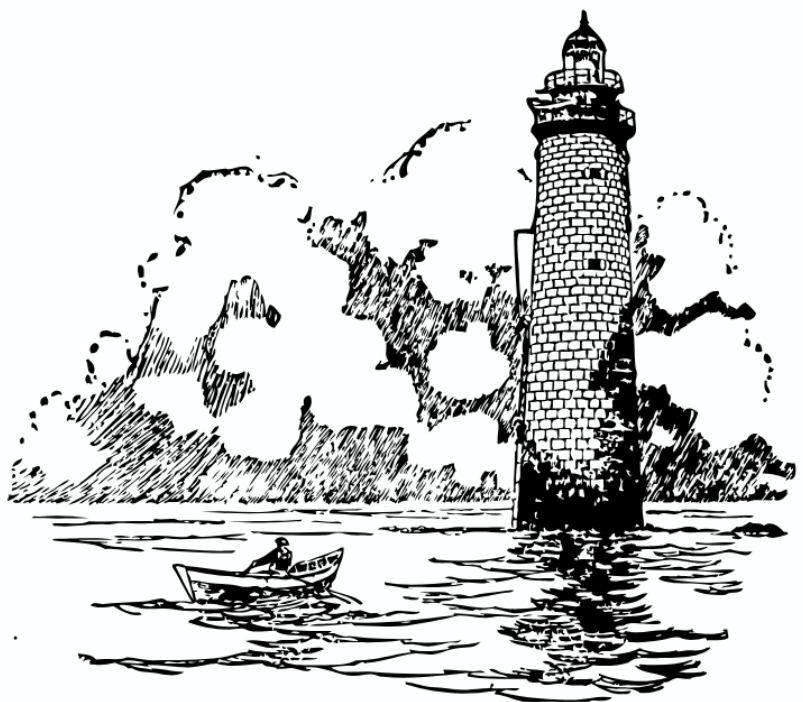
Rising up, I stand, I've become so tall.  
Arthurian man, a beacon for all.

Waves lap at my feet, no mountain too steep.  
Above them I stand, a beacon for all.

My friends count with me, my enemies fall.  
My empire, my sprawl, a beacon for all.

No crown too heavy, no belt bound too tight.  
Kinfolk hear my call, a beacon for all.

The stone lies before me, the blade shines bright  
My story unfolding, legend told right  
In yonder green land, each home, every hall,  
This weapon, my sword, a beacon for all!



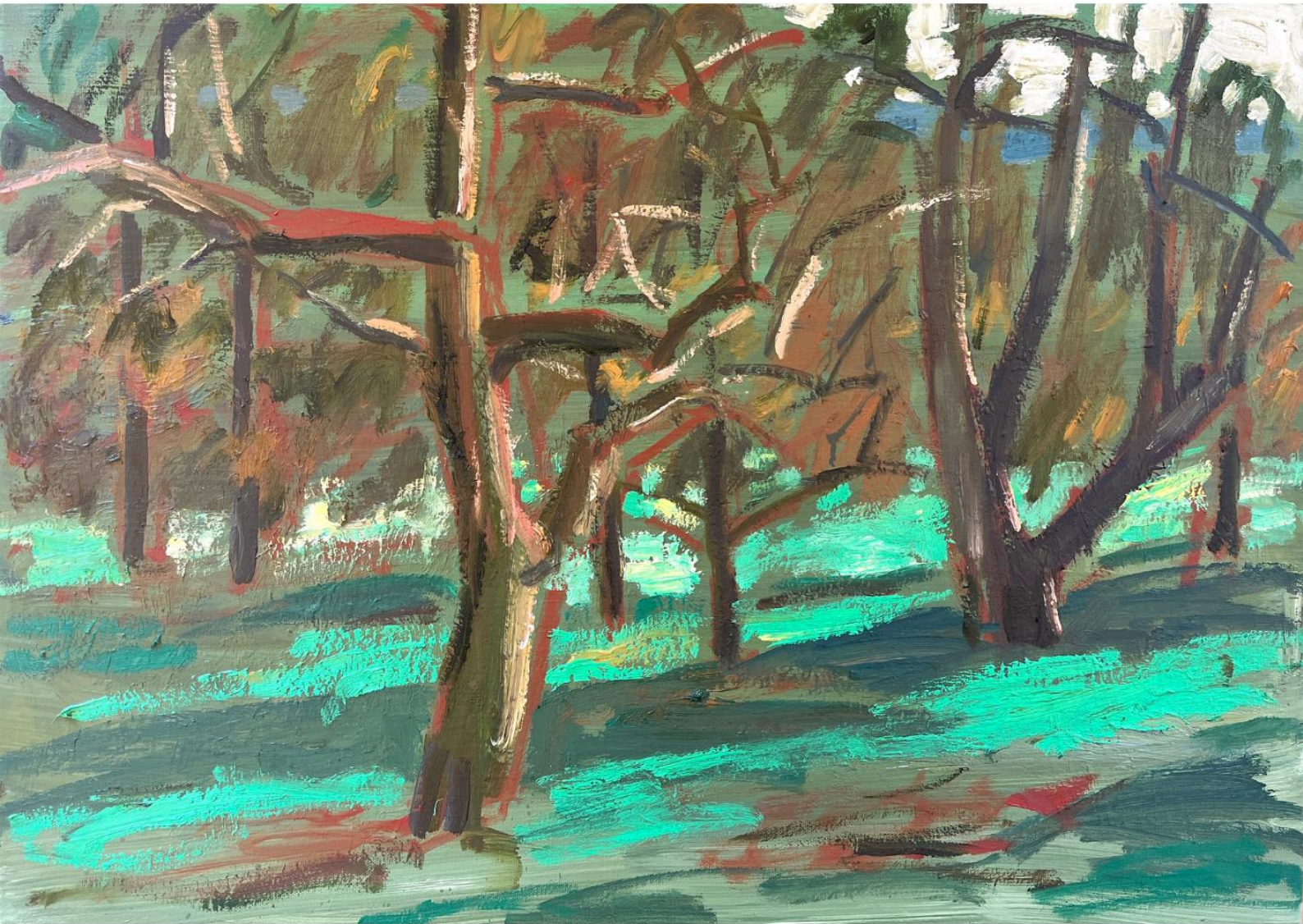


# Featured Artist

# Si Smith

[sismithart.com](http://sismithart.com)

Twitter @Si\_SmithArt



## **Tell us a little bit about yourself.**

I am British, 42 years old. I have never had any artistic formal training, and my educational background is philosophy; but i practised art a lot in my 20's (a lot of life drawing and drawing outdoors) and after severe illness in my 30's i restarted drawing and painting in 2023. I have continued steadily since and intend to continue.

## **Do you have a preferred medium and why do you go for it?**

I am not sure i have an absolute preferred medium, but I would say i am a big watercolour fan. However it is most important for me to get good with oil painting, and oil painting is a medium i find tricky. I am not good at accomodating long drying times - but there is nothing quite like a well worked oil painting.





I do like oil and dry pastels as mediums but they are awkward mediums because they do not 'fix', and need to be carefully stored or framed in order to protect the surface from smudging. In general i use a lot of various types of drawing pens and way prefer to draw in pen (as opposed to pencil).

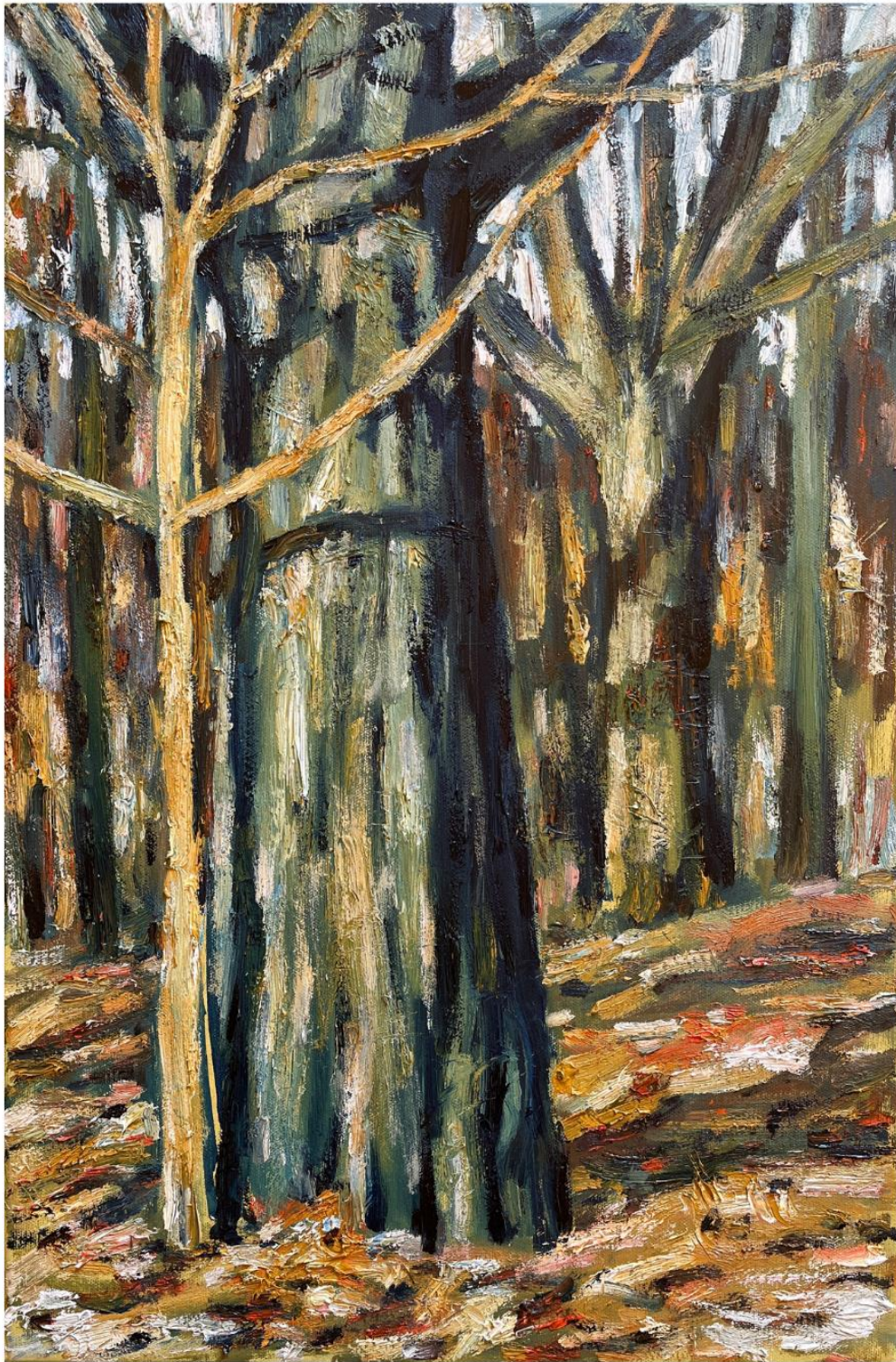
**You draw a lot of trees, what is your attraction to them?**

When i was teaching myself in my 20's i would go out and draw trees. Trees are a tough subject matter, but when they are well represented and described they always make good subject matter. Obviously they are central to landscape painting and i do a lot of landscape work. Trees are a universal symbol and appear symbolically in the earliest literary sources, so there is just something about them. The naturalistic tree studies of masters like Claude, Poussin and Constable are a great inspiration to me.

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

I am a big fan of Gothic literature so i tend to dip in and out of that and just went through small phase. I am also a huge Shakespeare fan so that is a constant in my life that i always go back to. At the minute though its mostly non-fiction, as i have been reading certain art histories and have been reading books on Henry Fuseli, Bruegel, and the Northern Renaissance.





**Aside from painting, do you have any other passions?**

I spend a lot of time with my family, and go out with kids for walks when i get the chance. Collecting has also always been a big part of my life. At one point i collected certain trading cards, and i also collect old video game posters. I have a small art collection of high quality art pieces i have managed to buy cheap on ebay over the years, but its hard to find stuff like that now and am not really doing that at the minute. Ideally I would collect original works of arts from auction, but thats a very expensive hobby and nothing I can afford to do - maybe some day!







# GERMINAL, FLOREAL, PRAIRIAL

J. Arthur Thomson



EVERGREEN VOLUMES  
Volume 1  
Spring 1895



'GERMINAL, FLOREAL, PRAIRIAL' These were names given to the Spring months at a famous time, some hundred years ago, when men in the April folly of their hearts dreamed that they could make all things new. But the new names, which are not without merit, have passed away with many other things; the old names remain, and they are well enough. For is not March a month of warring, of elemental strife, when the sun gains his well-assured annual victory ; and is not April indeed the month of opening ? The earth opens and the seedlings lift their heads, drowsily nodding ; the buds open, and the leaves unfold; the flowers open, and the newly-awakened insects visit them : it is the time of opening—of eggs and of the womb, of the song of birds and of the heart of man. Nature's optimism is too strong for man's pessimism, as the sun for the frost: the Springtide is irresistible. They bound Dionysus fast, but as well try to stop the rush of sap in the vine. Zagreus they cut in pieces, but he had to be put together again. Gloomy Dis robbed Demeter of that charming girl Proserpina, but she was too good to lose, she had to come again out of Hades. Baldur the beautiful was slain with the wintry mistletoe, but if he did not come to life again, he was at least well avenged by another of his inexhaustible race.<sup>21</sup>

'GERMINAL, FLOREAL, PRAIRIAL' Our favourite Dornroschen was pierced by a cold spindle, but she slept and did not die, and the Prince kissed her awake. Likewise, in the torrid zone, where the winter conquers by heat, the Phoenix was consumed, only to rise triumphant from the ashes of his burning. The Gospel of the Resurrection is irresistible. The corn of wheat that seems to die brings forth much fruit. Demeter has for long been mourning in our midst—a Mater Dolorosa—seeking her lost child, often angry and terrible, often plaintive and tearful, veiling her lost beauty without hiding her deep agony. Yet all the while she has shown the strong virtue of maternity. For without food or drink, explain it who will, she has nursed the tender life of Keleos, and the youth flourishes bravely. The rise of temperature has quickened the seeds, the ferments have dissolved the hard stores into soft foods, the very minions of Death—the Bacteria—have helped to loose the bands of birth, and the seedlings are rising from the ground. For now the anger of Demeter is stayed, Proserpina has returned from the kingdom of the dead, mother and daughter rejoice together. And in a world where all is so wonderful, c so full of death, so bordering upon Heaven,' is there anything so wonderful as this meeting of life and death, as this raising of what we call dead into what we call living, as this power that plants have to win the sun's aid that they may by secret alchemy transmute the beggarly elements of water, soil, and air into the rich wine of life ? We can understand the dying Keats saying that of all things the most beautiful was the growing of the flowers. Pan, the warm spring breeze, is with us again ; and everywhere we hear his merry pipes. Now he is among the rustling withered reeds, quickening them to leafage, and setting the birds a-singing ; now he is over the rippling lake, swifter than the swallow. Yesterday we heard him in the glen, goodhumouredly carrying a naughty cuckoo's tidings to one of her many

lovers; to-day he roams by the lake-side, and sets the daffodils dancing. But his pipes are not always merry, for he sighs through the gorge and among the crags, where Boreas, last winter, so ruthlessly slew Pitys, whom Pan loved. See the God: who ever did? But do we not catch in these floating spring-webs the fringe of his flowing robe, as men saw it of old time when they called it Godsamer. With the piper-major has come all his retinue. For the myths are all mixed as is the medley of voices ; now it is Pan, and again it is the Pied Piper who gathers life in his train ; now it is Zephyrus playing with Chloris, and again it is Orpheus whom none can resist. But the fact at least is plain, and that is what concerns us ; the birds, who went forth wailing, have returned rejoicing, and whether it be the naughty cuckoo, who has hoaxed all the poets, or the dove who is morally not much better, or the stork on the roof-trees, or the nightingale melodious, or the lark at Heaven's gate—everywhere from the orchestra which weekly gathers strength, we hear but one motif, Hither, my love, here ; here I am, here ; the winter is over and gone; arise, my love, my fair one, arise and come away.' Dornroschen, the Sleeping Beauty, has been kissed awake again. One after another had striven in vain to win a way through the barriers which encircled the place of her sleeping, but at length the Prince and Master came, to whom all was easy—the Sunshine of the first Spring day. And as he kissed the Beauty, all the buglers blew, both high and low, the cawing rooks on the trees, and the croaking frogs by the pond, each according to his strength and skill. All through the palace there was re-awakening : of the men-at-arms, whether bears or hedgehogs; of the night-watchmen, known to us as bats; even of the carpet-sweepers, like dormice and hamsters—all were re-awakened. The messengers went forth, the dragon-flies like living flashes of light, the bustling humble-bees refreshing themselves at the willow-catkins by the way, and the moths flying softly by night. I fancy that even the scullery-boy got his long-delayed box on the ear, for I saw the snail draw in his horns as the Cook awoke. These are the days of youth—of seedlings, buds, and young blossom, of tadpoles, nestlings, and young lambs. Of which, as of children, there are two thoughts which one cannot help thinking. The first is a thought of Easter, of the forgiveness of Nature, of its infinite power of making a fresh start. We saw the vine robbed of all its leaves—transfigured in their dying—and hardbound by the frost ; but Dionysus smiled at his captors, and now the tender vines put forth a sweet smell. We saw the sloe in winter, bare as a bleached skeleton in the desert ; but now it is covered with white blossom, which we almost mistake for snow still unmelted on the hills. We saw the hedger strip the hawthorn till it was pitiful in its nakedness, but now it is covered with bursting buds, and it will soon be the time of May-blossom. From amid the withered leaves the wood- anemones are rocking like foam-balls on a wreck-strewn sea ; and from the ditches, lately black and empty, the marsh marigolds have raised their golden cups to be filled with sunshine. We wished the birds farewell in Autumn, and now they are gathering to us again, and every lark that rises voices forth a promise. We saw the

butterflies fade away with the withering flowers, but once more they suck the blossoms; the shorepools and the pond-pools were but a little while ago empty of apparent life or thickly frozen over, and now each is beginning to be like a busy city. For as surely as the old things pass away, so all things are made new ; and from what seemed a sealed tomb life has arisen indeed. But, if we can express the second thought, it will be seen that there is a deeper sense in which these are the days of new things. It is the time of marrying, pairing, and mating ; it is the time of giving birth to new lives ; or it is the time when new lives, begun long since, indeed begin to be. In all these young lives there is what is new ; no one of them is quite like its parents, but each carries with it the promise of better or worse: in the phrase of the biologists, this is the time of variations. It may be, indeed, that the newness is simply that what was of evil in the parents has been forgiven in their children; but sometimes it is that

the little child leads the race, as was said long ago. It may be, too, that the promise is never fulfilled, for the playful lamb grows into a very stolid sheep (man has the way of making young things stolid) ; the activeminded chick becomes a very matter-of-fact hen ; the ' promising ' young anthropoid, a care-worn, abruti,' and rather cross-grained ape. Need we draw the moral? The fact—at once hopeful and tragic—is that the young life is often ahead of its race. If the promise be fulfilled, then the world makes progress, and this is Spring. But come, let us light the Beltane fires and keep the Floralia ! for while Biology is well, to enjoy the Spring is better ; and, as was said by one who knew no winter in his year, or at least betrayed none, 1 To make this earth our hermitage A cheerful and a changeful page, God's bright and intricate device Of days and seasons doth suffice.'





# Ancient Rose

*Splendid Badger*

We will watch the fruit while it's ripening,  
And wait for the leaves to fall.  
Work to cultivate the coming crop,  
And be ready with scythes when called.

For we wait for the fruit to ripen,  
While gravity determines their course.  
And when the time comes along to capture them,  
Our baskets will be woven and taut.

Like the gentleman that waters his garden,  
As the sun shines upon his land of gold.  
While stripped of his blade to sharpen,  
It's his mind that he must nurture and mold.

Take the time to cultivate our most fragile of flowers,  
Petals of the ancient rose.  
For as the garden decays and dies,  
It is her memory that will nourish the soul.

Continuously cramped, trapped in, and hemmed,  
Deprived of what makes us human.  
And no longer men may comprehend,  
A future that is golden.

You must silently endure the corruption,  
The debasement of your kin.  
And if you speak against their twisted vines,  
Let the lies and intimidation begin.

This corrupted form we must overcome,  
And step over the thorns of guilt.  
Or else face a forever war,  
Lamenting all the blood, ever spilled.

While we dance within the ashes,  
Facing the facets of our ancient past.  
The final sunrays set behind the dale,  
And by moonlight, we take the garden back.



# Castle Rock

## Extract from *Die When I Say When*

LUKE GILFEDDER is a writer from Manchester, set to launch his debut novel, *Die When I Say When*, in 2025. Previously, he worked as a playwright, with scripts produced at The Royal Exchange Manchester, the Lyric Hammersmith, and in London's West End. He has recently completed a PhD on the life and work of the modernist writer, Wyndham Lewis.

His fiction has been published in the *Decadent Serpent* and *The Brazen Head* magazines, and he regularly contributes essays to *The Miskatonian* and the *Lewisletter* journal.  
Twitter @lukesgilfedder





**Introductory synopsis:** *Several wealthy elderly men have committed suicide under mysterious circumstances, and Quinn Roseblade suspects that his long-lost school friend, Falin Mac Naught, has murdered them.*

*Now, Quinn learns that Falin has returned to Cheshire in the company of Sir Rafael Mordkine—another heirless baronet from the affluent village of Alderley Edge. With Falin's old girlfriend, Raina Desember, Quinn sets out to investigate, taking their evidence to the retired police chief, Doyle Brogue, who lives alone atop the ancient, wooded sandstone ridge that gave the village its name: the 'Edge'.*

Back on Alderley's high street, the snow fell in fat, fluffy clumps, like stuffing spilling from a torn cloud. The taxis had all buggered off early, leaving a silent sheen of tyre grooves on the road. Oh well, Quinn shrugged. They'd have to walk. They set off toward the Edge, a weary wooded shadow looming over the village. Raina shivered at the thought of hiking over that dark hill to Brogue's montane abode; Quinn shivered more at the prospect of meeting the man himself. Brogue's bullhound mug was never out of the local papers: he was chairman of practically everything in Alderley that could be chaired, yet had more misconduct allegations than a comically corrupt cop in a Raymond Chandler thriller.

Crossing the lights by the Trafford Arms, Raina asked:

"Did you find out the old man's name, by the way? The one Falin was with?"

"No. The waitress assumed he was Falin's grandfather. Why else would an elderly man be dining with a younger man at Christmas?"

"Why exactly..." They turned off the high street onto the softer crunching snow of Mottram Lane. A cricket pitch, emptily illumined, stretched on one side, while a row of brick geraniumed cottages climbed the Edge's northerly slope on the other. Quinn bore up Squirrels Jump, a charmingly cobbled path that rose alongside the teetering houses into the woods. As the gradient steepened, the cottages grew into mansions, their gardens festooned with imported bamboo palms whose sad, feathery shafts dripped snow against the night sky. Most of these trophy homes still sparkled with tinsel and blinking lights, but the residents behind the palatial windows wore the Christmas spirit like masks.

"I've never been up this way before," panted Raina, clutching her trench tighter about her. The last of the moon-polished mansions towered over them, bearing such malapropos names as 'Casa Gould' and 'Villa Sonnenstich.' Yet these English castelletos seemed to have outgrown their use in winter, having faded to that dirty grey-white shade—intensely spectral yet matter-of-fact—in which seaside resorts love to indulge.

"I'm sure this is the fastest way to the Edge," Quinn said. "At least, I remember it being..."

The path narrowed between the two uppermost gardens, winding under high privet hedges and snowy araucarias before vanishing through a gate into the ancient woods. Quinn crossed first into the stirless gloom, guiding Raina along a track thick with murky foliage and rank with the black scent of damp leaves and earth. The trail seemed to skirt time itself, now dipping

along a ridge, then rising again—on and on as it wound its sinuous way up to the peak of the wintry wood, whose sylvan quietness shut out the village below as soon as it shut out the world.

"Do you think Falin might murder this old man tonight?" whispered Raina, her voice a quiver in the dark, "What if he brings him up here to do it?"

"Not likely. If they were dining in public, the chances are they've only just met. Let's just hope that gives us enough time..."

Snowflakes fell dream-slow around them, and a gley branches clawed at their faces as the thicket closed in. The Edge was not a place you'd want to be at night: there was an unnerving lack of birdsong in the trees, no owl's scritch or even chattering bats—just a silence, inherent and inseparable from those starlight-still boughs, a silence that *knew* something.

They tramped on up the slope, the village dropping away steeply below them, the beeches towering higher and higher above. Nearing the top of the slope, Raina shook Quinn's sleeve and pointed. It was a stone trough into which water dripped, lunarly illumined, from an overhanging cliff. The face of a bearded man was carved high in the rock, his ancient stare clear as ice in the moonlight. Raina ran a finger along his cheeks. They were velvety green with moss and gold-veined with lichen. Serious as a schoolgirl, she transcribed the words beneath:

DRINK OF  
THIS AND  
TAKE THY  
FILL FOR THE  
WATER FALLS  
BY THE  
WIZARDS  
WILL

"He looks old."

"Of course he looks bloody old. He's Merlin."

"Merlin?"

"Well, it's kind of implied. Have you never heard the two legends of Alderley Edge? One is that the Wizard slumbers beneath this ridge with King Arthur and his knights, ready to rise again when England is in its direst peril."

"And the other?"

"...that Alderley-Edgers drink more champagne per capita than anywhere else in the country."

Raina smiled back through the trees at the haze of lights below. "I'm not sure that one's a myth."

They left the well and clambered the scarp towards Castle Rock. The tangled glittering of the wood's roof rolled away as they reached the top, revealing a flat outcrop that jutted from the crest and hung sheer above the Cheshire plain. During the day, it commanded rainy views out to Manchester, the moors of Lyme and the black tors of the distant Peaks. But tonight, with snow-fog banked up to the cliff face, they could only make out the trembling treetops, a few garden pools oiled by the moon, and the orange hearths of shadowed farmhouses floating far below. Raina teetered on the lip, watching a

tiny rattling train, broken into small fiery segments, glide out of Alderley Station and cross the dark plain.

"It's beautiful, don't you think?"

It was, but Quinn would rather have had it ugly just then. A pause hovered between them. It was she who broke it. "This is the place, isn't it... where the crash happened...."

Quinn nodded heavily toward a metallic scar gashed in the rock. The screams and flames of that night had been a shock to Falin's delicate sensibility; to Quinn, they were an assault on stability itself. He had sat Falin down on the lip where Raina now stood, and, cradling his friend's head in sympathy—thinking him about to cry—sunk his hand into Falin's damp brown Vitruvian curls like an absent-minded craftsman sinking his hands into the wet clay he was kneading into a man. Yet when Falin raised his head, his face was set, with no trace of tears. His black-green stare banished all Quinn's fantasies. It was his grandfather's hard Irish eyes that looked back at him that night—the type that puts dirty sand in your concrete.

Raina stepped back from the Edge, staring at Quinn's half-shadowed, thought-riddled face. "You said, in the bar, that you felt guilty for saving him. Why?"

Quinn shrugged under his coat. He could hardly tell her he'd spoiled Falin's birthday wish to die at the mystical age of twenty-seven, and not a second over: to die at that exact moment, rare as the green flash of sunset at sea, a boy eternal, like those Greek gods who perished to be reborn—Iacchus, Dionysus, Attis, Narcissus, Icarus, Phaeton, Adonis, or Eros. No, she would not understand. The moon and the feminine die and are reborn every month and have less need for the drama.

"C'mon Quinn," she said when he didn't answer, tugging his sleeve, "let's get to Brogue's before it gets any darker. This night's been weird enough already."

Leaving the eerie altitude of Castle Rock, they followed the path onward into the wood's frost-hung canopy, passing swiftly round the Armada Beacon, an altar-shaped stone set atop a Bronze Age barrow. From there, Quinn bore deeper into the wood toward the Wizard Inn, a bare mile south, along no track Raina could see. They tramped in single file between high gnarling trees, mossy stone walls, ditches, banks, and ancient boundary stones, treading with that crisp crunch-crunch-crunch which is the only comment a quiet winter night will pass on a lonely boy and girl. It all came back to Quinn as they walked: the scent of the beeches, the frozen rustle of dead leaves underfoot, the twists of the trail (which the hump of an oak's root crossed here and there), the strange dark air, and the feeling that the Edge both stopped and melted time...

The farther the track maundered through the twining beeches and oaks, the blacker and boskier the woods became. Not a bough stirred in all the dark December trees, and by the next turning, their branches had wholly blotted out the moonlight. After that, Quinn could not say where the faint light was coming from. It was as if the air itself were luminous.

"What time is it?" Raina said, slinging her bag diagonally across her chest to keep it from falling. "Feels

like we've been walking for ages." Just then, the mysterious boom of an invisible plane split the air, and the Edge fell still, breathless. When the plane was gone, the silence flowed back in, austere and tomblike, filling every thicket and secret bower. Jewels of snow dripped from the branches, and the wood was once more a marvel of inky shadow and silver light. "Merlin's near", Raina said in a church whisper, and to Quinn's surprise, she was serious. Whatever this *anima loci* was, it radiated through the wood without diminishing its substance. It gained instead by giving, and the mastery with which it fertilised everything enrapt her. Such a great light must always be secret, Quinn thought superstitiously, else it would destroy, distil... so it shrouded itself in time.

The track narrowed as they pressed on, the undergrowth taking over. Soon, it was hard to tell if it was a track at all or just something vaguely resembling one. Inevitably, it was swallowed by a sea of ferns, with frozen puddles and ponds gleaming through the fronds. Raina halted, hesitant, before an iced-over brook.

"Watch it!" she called as Quinn treaded across.

"It's okay," he replied, glancing back, "ice won't betray you—until it does."

"What a boyfriend you'd make..." she prodded the frozen crust with her toe. He took her arm as she made an awkward leap across to him, but she did not attempt to withdraw it as he helped her up the wet, red slope. At the top, Raina released his hand and put it around her waist.

"You press the vein in my arm, holding it so tight."

Onwards they traipsed through the endless alder thicket, or so it seemed to their weary feet. Since crossing the brook, the atmosphere had changed: no longer so dank or ferny, it had grown cold, clear and sepulchral. The marcescent leaves were crystalline and, looking upward through the branches, it was as if they were gazing through a roof of glass. Quinn dimly recalled having passed this way before, on a school history trip to the mines. He liked history, but it was not history that bade him and Falin sneak out of their dorms and return to these woods at night. No, it was a sorrowing for things lost and unknown, gone beyond recalling, for the sense of perfect, regal security that came with walking in a realm inherited from their ancestors: a land laid waste, a Britain just abandoned by the legions, its rare pavements riven by frost and Celtic magic still brooding on the old grey hills and down the black depths of the Edge. When Dr Falconer found out about their nemorivagant wanderings, he was Calvinistic in his reproach—not so much for their breaking of Legh Hall's rules, but more because he believed such zeal should be reserved for mountaineering and rugby; the dilettanti might even play fives and read Shakespeare without his disapproval, but healthy public-school lads should have "naething to do" with decadent and pagan eras.

Parting the overhanging branches, Quinn led the way ahead, the pseudo-path twisting and dipping as it followed the curve of the brook. Last year's fallen needles matted the ground—soft, thick, and dark as old pennies—dampening their every step. In the silence



between them, they heard the faint gurgle of a waterfall running in the shadows, but the windring brook took them away from it. Bearing sharply south, the path suddenly debouched into a moonlit clearing, inexplicably untouched by the surrounding growth of dense pines. Here the night sky opened wide before them—star-filled, to their surprise, for it had seemed black as a wolf's throat under the wood's glassy canopy. Raina pointed to a trench gashed into the sandstone.

"What's down there?"

The trench's slopes were barely distinguishable from the rock, though it must have stretched over a hundred feet and looked about twenty-five feet deep. Quinn said it was the entry to the Engine Vein, a Bronze Age mine later used for copper by the Romans.

"Dr Falconer—our teacher—used to say if you went down there and got lost, that'd be your end. You'd never be found again."

Raina shuddered. All these years living among Alderley's boutique shops, nail salons, aesthetic laser enhancement hubs, and cocktail bars, without ever knowing this subterranean netherworld of sleeping kings, heathen gold, deadly shafts and stalagmite chambers lay just beneath...

"Hey, look," Quinn pointed to a thin pillar of smoke spiring above the trees. "That'll be from the Inn. Brogue's can't be far now."

With renewed zest, they crossed the clearing and rejoined the wooded path. The foliage was thinner on this side, as pines and birches replaced the oaks, yews, and other strange, nameless trees of the denser wood. Through gaps in the thicket came glimpses of the vast, black plain stretching below. Only the satellite dish of Jodrell Bank stood out on the nighted horizon, shining like a great moondial, its Mark I telescope gazing up at the stars which knew enough to keep their distance from Manchester. Raina said it was strange how they seemed higher in Africa than here, given Alderley was in the North and so, she assumed, nearer to the heavens.

Emerging from a cluster of birches, they scurried down a mossy embankment and chanced upon an old straight track. Quinn spied a metal gate with a sign stating— somewhat supererogatorily— "Private road: no visitors." Beyond it, at the end of an overgrown drive, stood a ranch-style bungalow silvered by moonlight.

"Well, here we are," announced Raina. "Welcome to Bennachie Lodge."

'Welcome' was not the word: Bennachie Lodge was hiding from the world. Even the stormy waves of the treetops froze by its perimeter as if a magician had thrown a spell over them. Quinn stepped toward Brogue's gate, feeling Falin's photo crinkling in his breast pocket like a crackling of fire.





# The Portal

A West Country Folklore  
Medugal





*As part of my research on the origin of folklore, I have been developing a theory that attempts to tie folk traditions to the people's relationship with the land. The current consensus amongst my peers is that the origin of folklore is from people alone. I, however, have tried to assert the notion that the origin of our folklore is actually the land itself – a notion that has received much disregard, and not a little derision. I have been told my theories rely on the supernatural, or that perhaps I have been reading too many fairytales, but I believe it is they who have fantastical thinking, that these stories arrive to people through divine intervention!*

*I have seen the land tell its stories generation after generation, long after the populations changed, and it is well known that we are heavily influenced by our environments, and not just in the evolutionary sense, but also in the day-to-day by climate, wildlife, geography and the likes. After all, what is folklore if not the collective understanding of our surroundings?*

*My theories require no supernatural thinking but instead look at how humans tell stories based on the environments*

**Friday 16 August** - I spent the entire journey back writing up my notes from the trip and revising my latest theory of the four states of human habitation, when I was forced to pack up ready for landing. With little else to do, I had spent the remainder of the flight gazing out at the tiny roads and buildings that made up London – A grey scar on the landscape that I had once admired but I am now loath to return to. London, within the framing of my theory, would constitute an example of human subjugation of the land; an imbalance between man and nature causes him to become strange and twisted as he struggles to understand a world he has not evolved to recognise, The Dominion State. Smirking, I amused myself, relating my own theory to that of humourism in the past: “The city is melancholic in temperament, unbalanced by an excess of black bile”. We touched down shortly after, baggage and customs passed without note and I quickly found myself on a coach, traveling towards more agreeable lands.

The coach stopped along the way, and I knew I should exit, only the dismal weather convinced me otherwise. The heavy grey clouds poured sheets of rain so dense it appeared as if a thick fog had descended over the Salisbury plains. The barren landscape, these barrow lands, appeared particularly deathly – visible across the grassy plains were only few small mounds, a couple clusters of trees, and none of the famed standing stones. The temperature had dropped, unnaturally it seemed for this time of year, and so I decided I would leave this Niflheim for a future date. As we continued on our journey, the clouds began to part, and we chased the setting sun westwards, the last of the days light shining out like a beacon.

As I write this entry, the great handywork of Goram and Vincent looms below me from my hotel window, a foreshadowing of things to come, with tomorrow beginning day one of my research trip and the start of

*they inhabit. Excluding the true wilderness where there is no human habitation, and analysis is redundant, there are four states of human habitation: Dominion - man's domination over nature, unbalanced, characterised by horror, ugliness and confusion; The Untamed - Man and nature in a state of conflict, unbalanced, characterised by terror, savagery and the unknown; The Deceased - Post Habitation and civilisational collapse, balanced, characterised by stillness, desertification and sombreness; The Harmonious - Human in balance with nature, balanced, characterised by joy, beauty, life.*

*I have extensive research on this topic, in my first journal, from my recent trip to eastern Europe, where I have many fine examples of The Untamed state and all the folklore of vampires and werewolves that accompany it. As a follow up, I have already begun preparations for a second trip, this time to my home country of England, whereby I hope to find supporting evidence that I shall document in this here second journal volume.*

## Volume 2

my journey into the West Country. A land that holds significance as one of the last holdouts of the ancient Britons, now too the English. A place still much untamed, despite appearance, as an overturned log teems with life once disturbed.

**Saturday 17 August** - The pale blue of morning appeared as a slither on the horizon as I made my way to the station, and at daybreak the bus rolled into its stop. The bus driver, a soft chubby man with a Bristolian accent, pedantically questioned my stated destination as I purchased a ticket, but I was in good spirits and so didn't argue. Leaving the city, we began to travel through a heavy fog that had settled across the Mendips with a feeling that mirrored my flight over the clouds the day previously and soon we passed through the suitably named village of Cloud Temple. An hour in and suddenly I saw it – in the distance, emerging from the dense fog like a rocky island in a foamy sea, stood the isle of Avalon and its ever watchful tower. The object of much fascination to many would have to wait for another day as I had other plans, and my destination was elsewhere.

I arrived in the town of Cheddar and stepped off the bus onto the grass verge by the edge of the road, where wild yarrow stanchied ground wounded from excessive footfall. I passed through the narrow streets of stone buildings, seemingly carved from the same rock that made up the craggy cliff faces that formed the town's backdrop. Hiking along through the gorge I gazed up at the jagged ridges, shelves and crevasse, feeling the sense of being watched by hidden figures. In some sense this was literal, noticing the goats or sheep that had scaled the walls to pick at small tufts growing in the flatter sections, but I also began to imagine that feeling a foreign party, perhaps Roman, might have felt passing through such a rugged, unfamiliar landscape, whilst the strange folk of these parts glare down from above, in hidden recesses. I

strode the rocky path up the south side of the gorge, where the open patchwork of fields and farmland stretched out to the horizon, interrupted only by a number of scattered hills emerging like molehills on a grassy plain. Opposite and down into the valley below, people wandered along – herded like prey animals funnelled into the ravine.

At the other end of my hike I descended the stairs winding their way down the cliff face, and then further still. I had seen the eyes of the hill and now I entered into its mouth; Our tour group continued deep in caves under the ground, where stalactite fangs hung down from the entrance as the caverns stretched open like feral jaws, ready to swallow us into the darkness. Inside this lair where the remains of ancient beasts and men are found, one of our ancient ancestors laid out on display wearing the scars of this savage era upon his bones – signs of cannibalism, we're told. Amongst another cave in the area, includes the calcified form of a petrified witch that stands alone as its sole inhabitant. This began my journey into the wilds, where the weight of ages past bore down on one another like the exposed rock layers on a cliff face, places where thousands of years could not tame. By the evening I retraced my bus journey back to the small cathedral city I had passed through a few miles down the road where I retired for the night.

**Sunday 18 August** - I spent the morning discovering the ecclesiastical history of the city and the medieval buildings that still stood. The city stands as a small sanctuary in a land carved by giants and inhabited by pixies, witches and dragons, as the stories go. At noon I set off trekking along the Syrens, across the Somerset Levels – these wetlands had been drained centuries previously through a network of channels and ditches carved into the land. Though the land still wears man's handy work like tattoos across its surface, this swampy landscape still remains home to a whole host of creatures, some of which I was met with along my two hour walk, from smaller life like frogs and dragonflies to larger birds like buzzards and even a heron, or egret, out collecting his lunch. The Tor of Glastonbury guided me on and upon its summit, against the cloudless sky, appeared tiny outlines of people making their journey to the top. With each step forward I left civilisation behind as I proceeded into the heart of the countryside, and the town nestled within.

Standing watch on the outskirts stood the great oak trees, so called Gog and Magog, a nod to the race of giants that once lived on these lands. When I arrived at the fairytale town of Glastonbury I headed to my accommodation above the shopfronts, overlooking the street below. I had to follow quite a maze to reach this – down a painted mural alleyway, through a gate and across a courtyard lined with summer flowers and stone statues, into a door tucked away behind the building, up a spiral staircase with many offshoots and doorways, and finally across the long hallway where the entrance to my room stood. The old building, converted into separate apartments was

quiet, and I didn't meet with anyone upon check in, instead the apartments use a pin system to get in and out, which I had received in an email.

Out into the street, every shop and building here seemed dedicated to a different religion or spiritual belief from Abrahamic sects to eastern Hinduism and Buddhism. There were Pagan shops of Druidry and Heathenry, and of Wicca and witchcraft. Popular was a more maternal, feminine religion dedicated a 'Goddess' that seemingly idolised the female form and womanhood in general. But common amongst all of them, included within all of their art and place names, was the Tor – A guardian over the town, and to some the representation of this Goddess. The people here make pilgrimages to the top where they play music and light candles in ceremony, and they drink and bathe in the Tor's spring waters. It's known as the Isle of Avalon, and the resting place of King Arthur - The Holy Grail is even claimed to be located within the Tor. A place held sacred for thousands of years.

**Tuesday 20 August** - I decided today to return to an area of farmland I had passed by yesterday. Rows of corn grew across a number of the fields, seven feet tall with long, pointed leaves that overhung the footpath I took – a dirt trail of untilled soil that had been left through the centre. At each turn the world I'd come from vanished and the way before me lay further obscured as the path wound onwards. It was as if the unknown, terrors of the American frontier were brought back to my home of England, as mould spores clinging unseen to the crops of unsuspecting traders. Of the creatures that conceal themselves within such places, the hare is the most folkish, at once a cursed symbol of death and witchcraft, while also a Spring symbol of life and luck. I didn't not come across any on my journey, however.

I heard a local story: A man, on his return home from the pub one evening, took a shortcut across such a corn field. He had become lost on his way, unable to find a path out until he spotted a hare, standing in the middle of his path. The story goes that followed the hare through the corn, hoping it was leading him out, but he was never seen again. Weeks later customers of a local farm shop had reported human teeth grown within their cobs of corn, hard and white in place of some of the kernels.

Perhaps I had filled my mind with too many of these matters, but I had experienced something so strange I am struggling to understand it. Whilst out on this walk, I was stopped abruptly in my tracks when I had thought I had seen, right in front of me, the large, pointed ears of a hare. The heat of the noon sun bore down on me and in its brightness, I squinted, trying to get a better view on what was before me through the beaming sunshine. It was the movement in contrast to the sudden stillness that had caught my attention, the objects twitched against the crop leaves which had fallen silent as did the rest of the world, all life and motion retreating. Overwhelmingly I realised I stood in isolation, alone except for my sole observer to the south: the Tor and its tower, and the gulf



between us - closing, closer, closer, the separation shrinking, now gone, and eclipsing the sun it loomed over gazing down as the stasis enveloped me, we locked focus on one another in that eternity. Cold and still as the stone that towered above. Then I breathed, and the world breathed as life returned, the breeze once again danced the leaves of the field, and my sole observer, standing far to the south. There was no trace of any hare in the end, not that I had much mind to go looking at this point.

**Friday 27 August** - I woke today to a strange parade going through the town, early in the morning. Robed figures with lit candles marched along the high street, a procession heading in the direction of one of the churches up the hill, chanting or singing. When I inquired about this event, each person confirmed what I had seen, only they all mentioned it was a Sunday event, each week. I had assumed us to be discussing separate events, though I'm starting to doubt myself. I feel increasingly like a stranger to this place, an outsider becoming detached from all around me, as one peering in through a shop window, or perhaps peering out.

It's not the first I've felt myself losing track of time, and I'm far behind on my initial schedule. It was only a few days ago I found myself trudging through boggy footpaths under the pale glow of hazy moonlight. I stared up at an illuminated night's sky, and the prismatic corona around the moon that scattered out through a thin cloud covering, wondering where or when the day had gone. The Moon floated high up above the Tor like a great ghostly lighthouse, calling out across the marshes. In the sickly reflections of the wet ground the earth beckoned a gentle return to the darkness, a quite rest.

Down the path and country lanes, I made my back into town. I walked winding streets and pavements, under trees that hung overhead warmed by the orange glow of the streetlamps, the dwindling green a final farewell to the fading summer. I can't say how long I walked those streets for, but the deserted roads twisted and turned forever onwards until the cold of night began to bite. I felt not exactly lost, but at least in an unfamiliar place when finally, one last corner and I appeared back home unsure exactly how I had arrived back. I must have forgotten to create an entry for this day.

**Monday 6 September** - Up early this morning, beating the sunrise, I crept out along the old hallways so as not to wake the other occupants, with the sounds of the creaky wooden floorboards running through the building. To whom I give this courtesy, I do not know, as I have not seen or heard from other guests since I have arrived. Maybe it was the lack of daylight, but door after door I wandered through, up stairs and down corridors I walked before, beginning to panic, the feeling claustrophobia setting in, I found my way back outside, the ordeal must taken thirty plus minutes as the sun was rising as I found my way out into the light.

I travelled up a steep road and at the top looked out at the ring of hills out in the distance that encircled the

town which sat in the centre. I saw few people around during the day besides a couple of figures who drifted about their business down side streets and through doorways. In the park at the top of the hill I studied the fairy rings that dotted the grass. These small circles, each a few feet wide, were evident by the darker green colour of the grass and the white mushrooms nestled beneath. One of nature's little mysteries like ants who march in circles or the locals who parade around the Tor, each driven by some force to perform these rituals.

The shops must have closed by the time I had made my return home, and I had missed my chance at finding something for dinner. With little other options I had to dip into the items I had planned to take back home at the end of my trip. I ate these alone on my bed, all my notes and books scattered around me, with only the whisper of the cool breeze through the half open window to keep me company.

**Sunday 1 September** - The days grow shorter, and a chill has descended over the land. In the mornings frost grips the town with a white crystal veil that coats the fences, and trees which now stand barren as a premature winter approaches. Delicate wisps of steam dance from the roof tops warmed by the daytime sun, as I wander empty streets, the brittle grass crunches under foot. I believe it's been days since I have seen another soul, though I no longer trust my sense of time, but despite this I do not feel like I'm alone in this place.

The roads and buildings are now unfamiliar to me, a changing labyrinth that twists around the great eye - the custodian of the land. From over the buildings all signs of civilisation have disappeared, swallowed up by endless grass and trees stretching out endlessly on the horizon. The world is silent now, the cars don't drive, the buses don't run, all my attempts to leave this place on foot have been futile.

Lured in by the sirens song to this rock, marooned and kept here by strong currents that refuse to let go. It's as if I'm in the grasp of a vast tempest and with no other hope of escaping but down, down into the eye of the storm. All the world I knew before now splinters against the jagged rocks that stand ever indomitable against the ages.

----- - I now see only one path before me that I must take, or this place will bury me. I've watched the days pass from the windows of this room, upon my bed, a small raft in this dark ocean, the sun has set for the last time. One by one the lights went out until only one remains, the watcher that has scrutinised me since my arrival. It has followed my every move like some great Sauronic eye, I see it through stone, and brick, and wood, and in the night, in the dark and when I sleep. The drums beat and the fire glows dimly away above me, the last light, the last warmth, and the start of my final journey. The walls flake off and the wooden beams splinter and rot as I head out of this room for the last time.



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Out on the frozen streets little remains of the town that the land hasn't reclaimed. Trees reach out across the roads; branches push through windows and out of roof tops. The pavement is cracked and brick work crumbles, almost entirely overgrown with grasses and weeds and small plants that drive their way through from deep roots that have lurked waiting for their chance to pull man's work back beneath the surface. The brambles have taken over and claw at me as I travel through what is now more of a wilderness than a street.

I travel lightly, I have nothing to bring, my food ran out days ago, though I can only guess at the time as the sun has failed to rise. The drums beat in my heart, in every footstep, quiet at first but growing louder and louder. The overgrowth starts to disperse as I reach the first steps and begin my ascent. I climb ever onwards, the beckoning fire and drums stretch further, impossibly far, the closer I get, but the tower grows all the greater above, it's dark shadow sweeps down the barren side of the hill. Now, atop this cold land of harsh wilderness nearing the summit, in the thin slither of silver moon light, I write this final entry.

*Friday 14 March – A few months have passed, and I have little recollections of the events that took place out on the Somerset levels, from the fragmented memories I have, I attempt to build the following account. Down into the soil I fell, tumbling through hedgerows and thickets. The cold lashed at my arms and face, as I staggered on an endless march. The ancient holloways swallowed me further still down sunken path were faces leers out of the carved dusty sandstone walls, a Hell Lane – but into or out of, I could not tell. Down these woodland tunnels I stumbled when finally, almost broken I emerged as if from the throat of a beast in a spray of spit and awoke to find myself washed up upon a solemn beach, as a sailor wrecked and broken against the rocks in a violent storm. The white cliff bore the fossilised skeleton of the land and all the ages on its face. I trekked the rocky shoreline with the vast black sea at my side until impassible terrain forced me inland. A wretched figure, I wandered onwards through the bleak twilight, scavenging for what little the land offered until the sombre moorlands unfolded out before me. Time passed and the more I forget, the more I remembered, I had come in search of those secrets not found in pictures or books, those not told nor seen, and atop the enormous granite plateau, in the centre of that grassy desert, I found them carved upon my bones, when the sun finally returned.*

*The date is the Fourteenth of March and across the land the bluebells bloom and the hares dance on the fields. Spring has arrived once more, but Winter remains as a frost that never thaws.*

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# Evening Solace

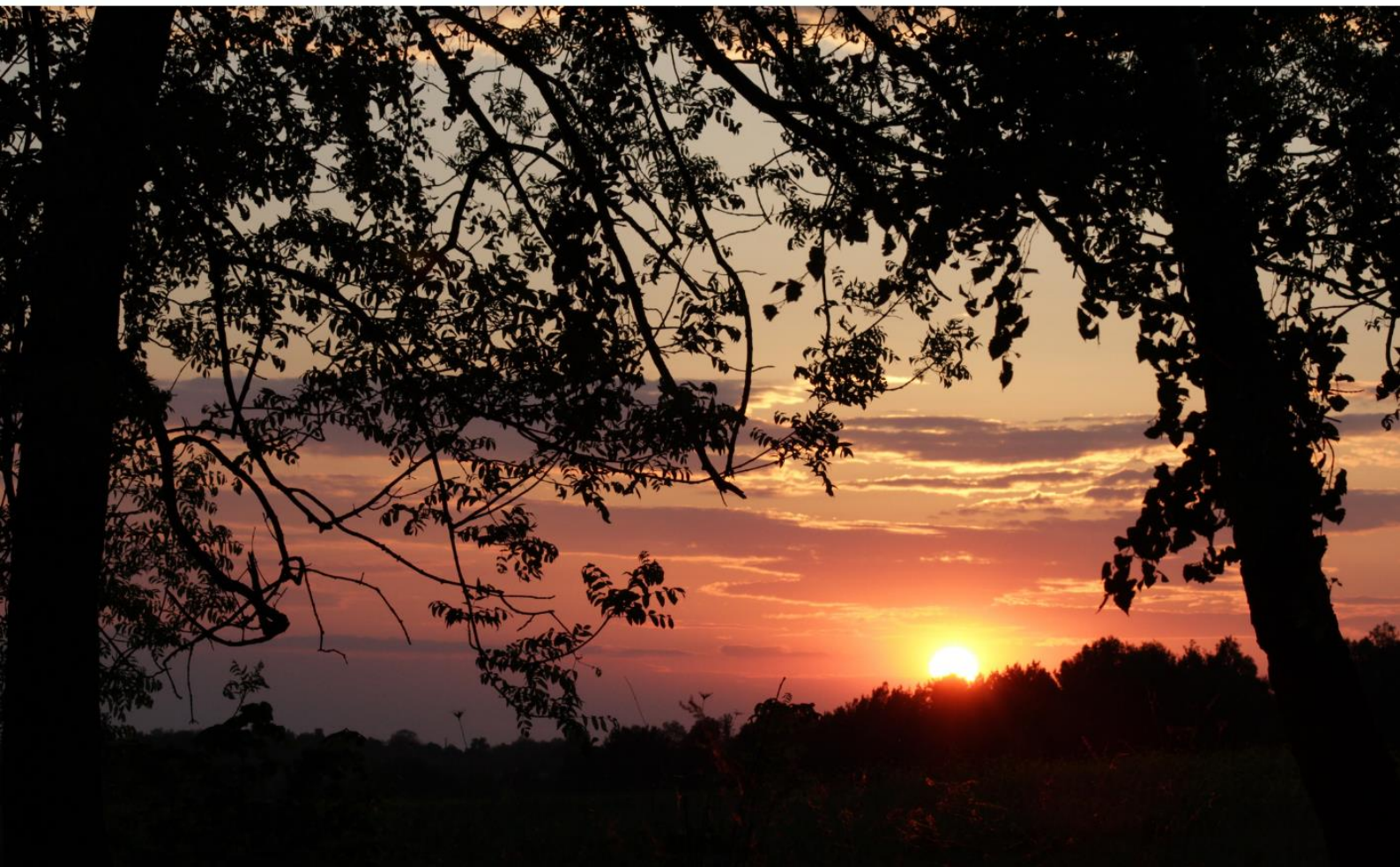
*Charlotte Bronte*

THE human heart has hidden treasures,  
In secret kept, in silence sealed;  
The thoughts, the hopes, the dreams, the pleasures,  
Whose charms were broken if revealed.  
And days may pass in gay confusion,  
And nights in rosy riot fly,  
While, lost in Fame's or Wealth's illusion,  
The memory of the Past may die.

But, there are hours of lonely musing,  
Such as in evening silence come,  
When, soft as birds their pinions closing,  
The heart's best feelings gather home.  
Then in our souls there seems to languish  
A tender grief that is not woe;  
And thoughts that once wrung groans of anguish,  
Now cause but some mild tears to flow.

And feelings, once as strong as passions,  
Float softly back a faded dream;  
Our own sharp griefs and wild sensations,  
The tale of others' sufferings seem.  
Oh ! when the heart is freshly bleeding,  
How longs it for that time to be,  
When, through the mist of years receding,  
Its woes but live in reverie !

And it can dwell on moonlight glimmer,  
On evening shade and loneliness;  
And, while the sky grows dim and dimmer,  
Feel no untold and strange distress  
Only a deeper impulse given  
By lonely hour and darkened room,  
To solemn thoughts that soar to heaven,  
Seeking a life and world to come.





# Parting

*Charlotte Bronte*

THERE'S no use in weeping,  
Though we are condemned to part:  
There's such a thing as keeping  
A remembrance in one's heart:

There's such a thing as dwelling  
On the thought ourselves have nurs'd,  
And with scorn and courage telling  
The world to do its worst.

We'll not let its follies grieve us,  
We'll just take them as they come;  
And then every day will leave us  
A merry laugh for home.

When we've left each friend and brother,  
When we're parted wide and far,  
We will think of one another,  
As even better than we are.

Every glorious sight above us,  
Every pleasant sight beneath,  
We'll connect with those that love us,  
Whom we truly love till death !

In the evening, when we're sitting  
By the fire perchance alone,  
Then shall heart with warm heart meeting,  
Give responsive tone for tone.

We can burst the bonds which chain us,  
Which cold human hands have wrought,  
And where none shall dare restrain us  
We can meet again, in thought.

So there's no use in weeping,  
Bear a cheerful spirit still;  
Never doubt that Fate is keeping  
Future good for present ill !





# Life

*Charlotte Bronte*

LIFE, believe, is not a dream  
So dark as sages say;  
Oft a little morning rain  
Foretells a pleasant day.  
Sometimes there are clouds of gloom,  
But these are transient all;  
If the shower will make the roses bloom,  
O why lament its fall ?

Rapidly, merrily,  
Life's sunny hours flit by,  
Gratefully, cheerily,  
Enjoy them as they fly !

What though Death at times steps in  
And calls our Best away ?  
What though sorrow seems to win,  
O'er hope, a heavy sway ?  
Yet hope again elastic springs,  
Unconquered, though she fell;  
Still buoyant are her golden wings,  
Still strong to bear us well.  
Manfully, fearlessly,  
The day of trial bear,  
For gloriously, victoriously,  
Can courage quell despair !



# Eagle's Flight 5

AR Duncan





The army retreated from Dunbrig sombre in their victory. The Seaxings and a small contingent of Stratyscans went north to prepare for the delivering of the final blow to Meildun if the demands of surrender were not met but none truly believed they would need to cause any further bloodshed. Merddin was returned to his father alive but in a state that no father ever wishes to see his son in. His survival was uncertain and if the gods decreed it that he were to survive he would remain sickly and feeble throughout his life. No matter the outcome of his condition he would not live to see another battle. Not even his lack of desire for bloodshed and glory had meant anything in the face of the fates and their unending plots. The king locked himself within his chambers for seven days and cried out to the fates, condemning them for their cruelty and injustice and none of the wise men of the town could convince him otherwise. To this father, his son had already died and nothing would bring him back. A crippled son was as good as dead. Only his most trusted servant and his daughter were permitted to see him, and even then only fleetingly, and when word arrived from Meildun that full surrender had been given, the duty of dealing with all the details fell to the king's advisors. Dunbrig would be granted in its entirety to King Armel of Stratysca along with generous war reparations. Upon hearing of this peace the king flew into a rage and declaring the injustice of the affair and demanded the head of every last remaining man in Meildun but even that would not suffice to cover the end of his lineage.

A week after the peace was signed, the Seaxings returned to their lands. The two grand longships bobbed in the gentle waves brought in off the sea by the warm late summer winds. They lay low in the water, their holds bulging with the riches of Dunbrig, a sign of victory and the God's favour. Unlike the men of Stratysca though, they would return home with little fanfare and not as heroes. After all they were only men returning from work. They had completed their work to the degree that was required of them and they returned home with the expected payments. How could anything but victory be expected for a Seaxing warrior.

Upon the pier Anaerin drew his knife across the span of his palm and Beadmund did likewise. They clasped the other tightly and their brotherhood was sealed in blood.

"I owe you my life. I hope one day I can repay it".

"I am sure that you will. And one day I hope we may fight alongside one another again. If I must fight at least may the gods will it to be alongside you. Brother".

The two embraced. Anaerin staring out at the still sea that lightly lapped at the edge of the harbour they stood atop. Across the sea how different the life that his brother must lead. Beadmund looked up to the wooden hall that

crowned the hill where the two brothers had first met in scorn. The hall once stood filled with light and life now seem home to only shadows and madmen. No mention was made of Merddin. In the hurry of battle only the two of them were aware of the failing that had led to his wounding neither had the heart to impose it upon the other.

Beadmund turned and stepped towards his ship bidding his friend and brother goodbye. Carys moved forward to fill his place and stand beside her betrothed. A month and a half later they were married.

"Son of the eagle. Daughter of the stag. Rise and wash".

The couple knelt alone in the sacred grove save for the druid who led the ritual. Down by the sacred brook that giggled in delight at the ceremony it witnessed and beside the carved holy tree that witnessed the world passing by with unseeing eyes, was the pool of crystal waters that the couple stepped down into. Both had removed their garments and upon their bodies had been painted the marks of the beast that had ruled the heavens upon their birth. Following the lead of the druid they submerged themselves and the markings were gone and they were one and married. They dressed themselves and returned to the waiting crowd outside the sacred grove. The crowd of celebrants returned to the hall where the feast was held and the drinks began to flow. Up and down the hall the people of Stratysca and their guests drank and ate and sang for they had much to be happy about and tomorrow they might die. A vast fortune had been spent to prepare for this day and to furnish all the townsfolk, as well as various dignitaries of the nearby towns and kingdoms, with food and drink, the likes of which the attendees would likely never sample again.

Servants wound up and down the hall filled with its long tables and were even given a space at the back to eat, drink, and celebrate for themselves when they were able to. Every few minutes a servant would walk to the back of the hall and disappear behind a screen, which was not out of sight but entirely out of mind of the horde of drunken partygoers, and present a small plate of food or half tankard of watered down ale to Merddin who lay there on a mat in one of his moments of lucidity. The immediate danger was over but he would remain weak from anywhere between years and the rest of his life depending on the optimism and political cunning of the wise men whom the king paid with exorbitant fees. It was unlikely he would ever walk again and any day he might catch a disease which would spell an immediate end for him. Above the sea of raucous joy, their king sat stoney faced and sullen, string with maddened eyes beyond the vulgar happiness and merriment to the screen where his heir lay a cripple. Beside him on the dais sat his daughter and son-in-law both overwhelmed with the joy of the day but he did not give them his attention. He had congratulated them in his official capacity as was their due but he was fixated on only one thing.

The wedding was the last fine day of autumn and soon winter was upon them and the whole town took shelter beneath the surface like plants waiting for the warmth of spring when they could reemerge from the ground and spread their leaves anew. The winds and rains and snows stopped almost all travel overland and the storms that wracked the Northern Sea dissuaded all but the most determined and profit hungry of traders. Of this small cadre of arrivals, none were distinguished enough to warrant being welcomed by the king, a detail that filled his councillors with relief. Armel was unfit to rule and getting worse. His mind followed his son's health to the border between life and death and wavered between the two. Many days he spent staring off into the horizon beyond the grey swell of sea and sky or staring at the shadows that swam across the wall of his grand hall that had not seen true light in months. Winter was as cruel and harsh as she every was but eventually the skies lightened, the days lengthened, and the seas calmed. Spring began and warmth slowly crept back across the face of the earth.

As the equinox and the celebration drew near it was clear that the king would not be capable of fulfilling the duties that were expected of him. Over the long months of winter Anaerin had been fully integrated into the workings of the kingdom and Grifud, the king's brother, requested that he fill a role in the rituals as he would have to take his brother's place.

At the ceremony of the spring equinox Anaerin stood behind his uncle-in-law whilst the king stood as emotionlessly as ever staring off to the other shore of the lake where the dense mass of pine trees and bushes forced their way right up to the bank of the soundless waters. Anaerin, like all men, knew that it was not good to stare too long there. That forest was home to the spirits of the land but the king did not heed this wisdom. Under the watchful leadership of the druid, Grifud recited the invocations and held aloft the silver goblet and the sword that were cast from the lakeside into the deeps, the ripples cascading out to the shores. From the opposite bank a shrieking raven burst from the woods, flying across the lake and over the heads of the assembled Stratyscans. An inauspicious sign. Trying his best to ignore the displeasure of the gods, Anaerin held the pine branches aloft.

"Gods, spirits, and land, take this offering and be merciful to us. Give us our harvest. Give us victory over our enemies. Give our king his strength and his life. He is our strength and life".

The last incantation was the hardest to call for. Anaerin threw the pine branches to the same spot where the cup and sword had vanished then took the two stones that were offered to him and cast them in also. The smoothest stones the river had to offer had been found and one had been engraved with the name of the king, the other with the name of his son. May the gods, spirits, and fates show mercy to them.

As the spring drew on and summer appeared on the horizon the nights grew longer and life swelled to its peak. The traders returned, arriving from up and down the coast and across the sea, coming and going as they always had done bringing wares and news from across the world. Their presence was the lifeblood of Stratysca. One morning in the midst of summer a boat arrived from Treowick, home to the King of the Seaxings. Many of the men aboard had been over last summer and fought with the Stratyscans at Dunbrig. After all the wares were unloaded and trading had commenced many of the men headed to a drinking hall where they greeted with open arms and a barrel of ale and were joined by many of the warriors of Stratysca, Anaerin amongst them. He was saddened not to see Beadmund with them but a prince had more duties than travelling with a simple merchant vessel. Nearly a year had passed since the Seaxings had returned home and there was much news to be shared. Merddin could walk once again but was no less frail, not being seen in public in months, and not any more regularly by his friends. The town and fortress of Dunbrig had been rebuilt and repopulated and at a grander scale than they had been before. The Seaxings were glad to hear that Anaerin had married and the Stratyscans reiterated the rumours that he might have a child on the way too. He refused to comment on the veracity of these rumours. All the talk felt awfully mundane in comparison to the news they had been sharing a year before and felt even more so when compared to the workings of the Seaxing kingdom. Of all the warbands that had returned in the past year only the Stratyscan warband had returned home successful and the king's position was looking increasingly unstable. A king who could not guarantee the success of his men was a king that the gods no longer favoured. Horst had ridden to kingship in a frenzy of glory from the gods but now that the winds had turned many men were risking it all to be the next vessel of the gods and it would mean his head. Bloodshed was sure to come. They would not talk any more of the machinations of power but on the pressing of Anaerin they acknowledged that Beadmund was held highly amongst the names of potential successors. The afternoon drew on and as the common men went about their drinking a messenger came from Grifud. Anaerin was required at the hall.

A delegation had arrived from the north with representatives from seven of the northern Goddohenic kingdoms, Meildun included. Stratysca had gone too far.

The delegation was too important to not to be received by the king so for the first time in a year the doors of the hall were flung open and men entered inside. Anaerin stood at the wall behind the king cloaked in the shadows that now stalked these halls. Once the great central fire had flooded the cavernous room with dancing orange light but now it barely did more than smoulder, leaving the kings flickering in twisting shadows. The grand doors were swung shut behind the guests and the seven men arrayed in their fine clothes of many colours stood at the foot of the dais staring up at the darkness of the throne



and the madman who sat upon it. The man in red and white stepped forward and was the first address the king.

“Your highness Armel of Stratysca, we are here from the northern kingdoms, your Goddohenic brothers. You must return Dunbrig, you have no right to the land and the gods are not pleased. Not only that but you invited men of foreign blood to rape and massacre your family so that you may conquer not matter the cost. The gods are not with you”.

From deep within the shadows a cruel smile inched forward into the red flickering firelight, hollow malicious eyes appearing soon after.

“Do not speak of what the gods want child. The gods do naught but smile on me and for twenty years they have given me naught but favour. All my petitions, all my divinations, all my supplications, have been answered with my glorification. I have built them temples, and protected their lands, and given them greater offerings than you ever will. Greater than any other man. Yet you try to speak to me of their will as if you know anything of that. The gods granted me this land. I won it. They are on my side not yours”.

He paused and let out a laugh that echoed around the inside of the hall seeming to be embodied by the shadows themselves.

“You come here talking of gods and conquest but you are nothing but wolves here to threaten my rightfully gained land. You will rally your men and your army will march south to take me by force but the gods will be against you, lowborns.

Anaerin stood against the wall behind the king with his heart beating out of his chest. He knew where this course would lead. They could not reason with a man in this state. Nothing could be done to correct the course that lay ahead of them, they would surely sail straight for the storm. Yet, did he want to correct it? The king would lead them to war again and the old men would complain and the women would weep but it was better than twenty more years of suffocating peace. Twenty years of peace and inaction had left Merddin crippled. His weakness had been bred by the man who now mourned him. Anaerin would not dare say this aloud but knew it in his heart to be true.

Another of the seven men stepped forward, this one in blue and gold.

“Your honour please do not take our words as insult. We do not for a moment question your piety. You have honoured the gods in many ways for all your life and we are sure that they are with you. And more we are all in awe of your strength of arms, your military power is unrivalled in these lands, none of us has any doubts

about your supremacy. But the town of Dunbrig is not yours.

“I will not bore you with a history I am sure you already know but it was only seven generations ago Dunrgi was settled by men of Meildun. It is their land, their ancestry that runs there they nursed forth this town from the land. Your show of force had woken us from our slumber and you may keep all the rewards and treasures that you won through your might but the land cannot belong to you. Is the wealth not enough payment for all that you have done?”.

“Do not fool around with the history of my land I know that its founding was not by men of Meildun but by who had been exiled from Meildun only for it to be conquered a decade later when King Morcant saw that the town was beginning to be successful. They have no more a claim to the land than you claim I have. My claim is the same as theirs. The gods have granted me my due”.

A third man from the group stepped forward the representative of the king of Meildun himself. He wore green and brown and his dark hair was shortly cropped and poorly kept as was the slight moustache that wriggled on his upper lip as he talked.

“The gods aren’t pleased with you though are they? You have taken what you say is your due but your punishment has returned in equal measure. Now I am led to believe that your son is now a cripple not far from his death. What father could say that the gods are with him and be faced with that. The gods hate you king, your son will die and your line ends because of your greed. Return to us our rightful land”.

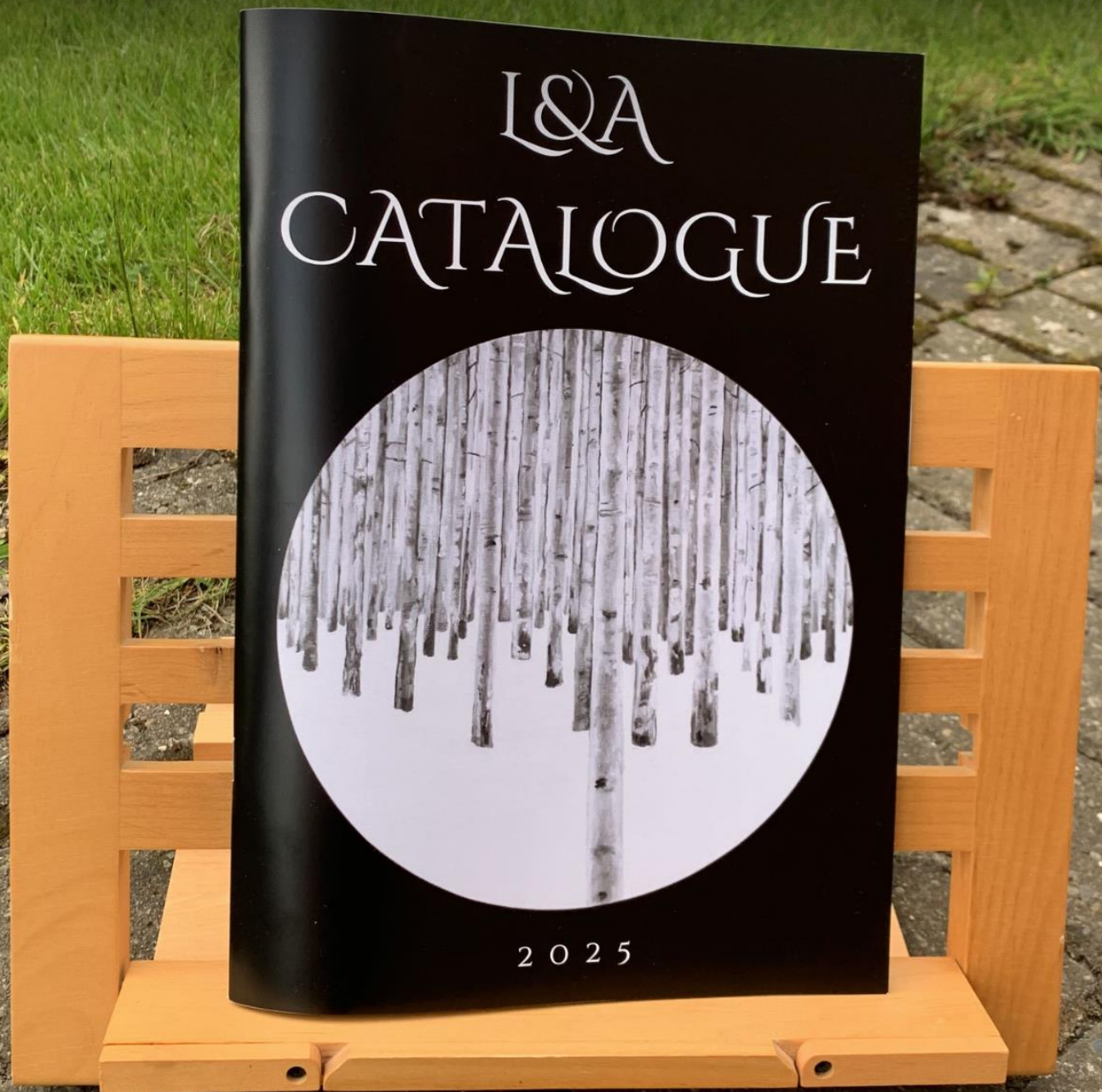
Armel erupted from his chair his once dead eyes shining brighter than the fire that burned at the heart of the gall. Words spilled for from his mouth with such force that it seemed like the whole building might catch ablaze.

“Their heads! Give me their heads! Get these men gone! It will be war!” came the repeated cries as the men behind the throne rushed forward. At the prompting of Grifud, Anaerin grabbed his father-in-law’s arm and try to get him back to his seat. The remaining men rushed the seven dignitaries out of the door and threw them out of the city without the same respect they had arrived with. The inevitable conclusion had been reached.

That evening still filled with rage, the king summoned his council and began plans for a new war. This time nothing was to be left of their foes. The Seaxings were to be invited back over but this time their reward was to be the land of their conquered foes to be resettled. Talhearn was chosen as the messenger and the following morning he was giving passage to Treowick with the returning Seaxing traders. A week later as battle plans were being drawn a pox came over Merddin and he died twisting himself in pain and screaming in his madness.



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Love is enough: though the World be a-waning,  
And the woods have no voice but the voice of complaining,  
Though the sky be too dark for dim eyes to discover  
The gold-cups and daisies fair blooming thereunder,  
Though the hills be held shadows, and the sea a dark wonder  
And this day draw a veil over all deeds pass'd over,  
Yet their hands shall not tremble, their feet shall not falter;  
The void shall not weary, the fear shall not alter  
These lips and these eyes of the loved and the lover.

From Love is Enough by William Morris



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