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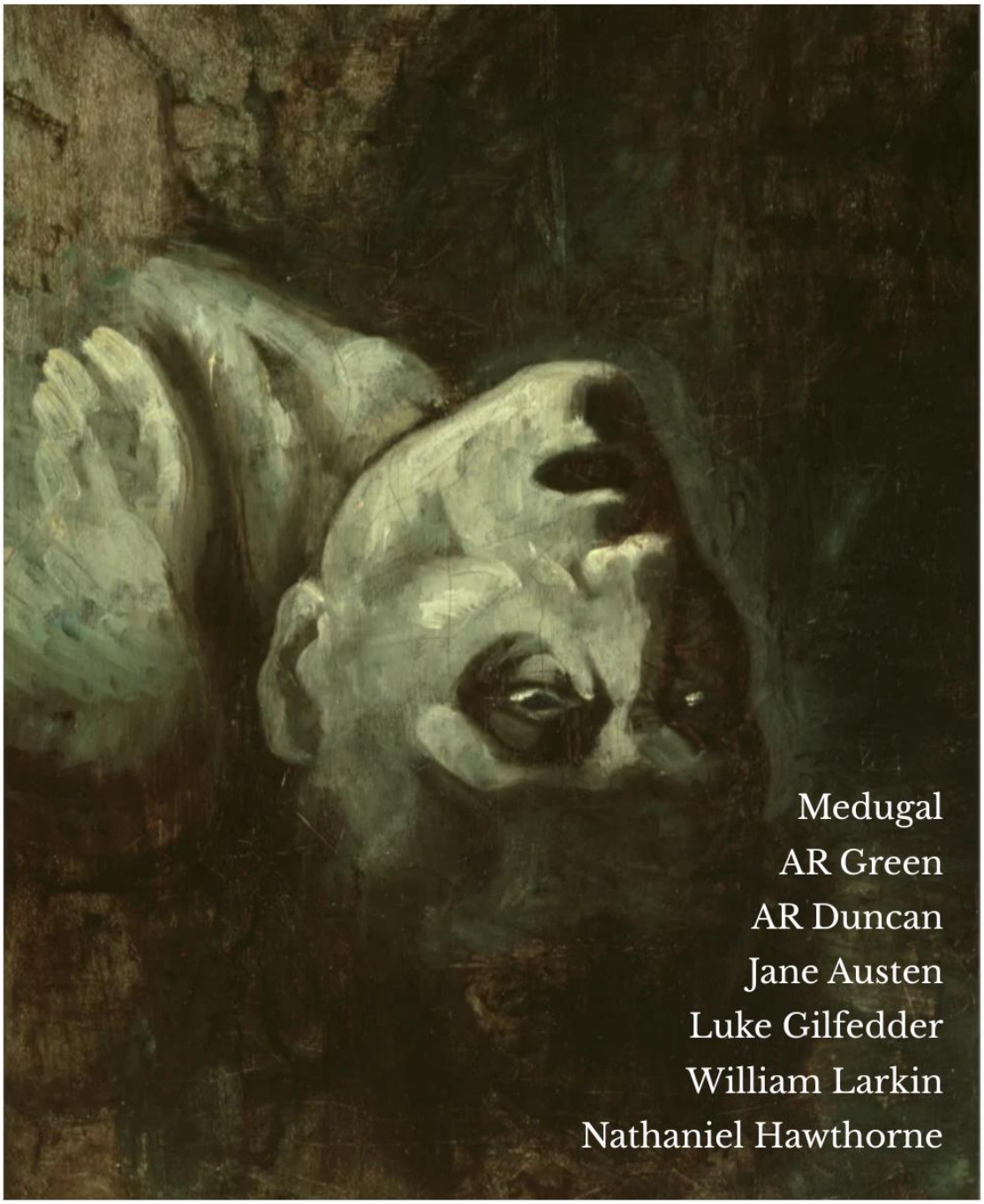

Medugal
AR Green
AR Duncan
Jane Austen
Luke Gilfedder
William Larkin
Nathaniel Hawthorne

RESTING IN THE OAK OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

L&A CATALOGUE

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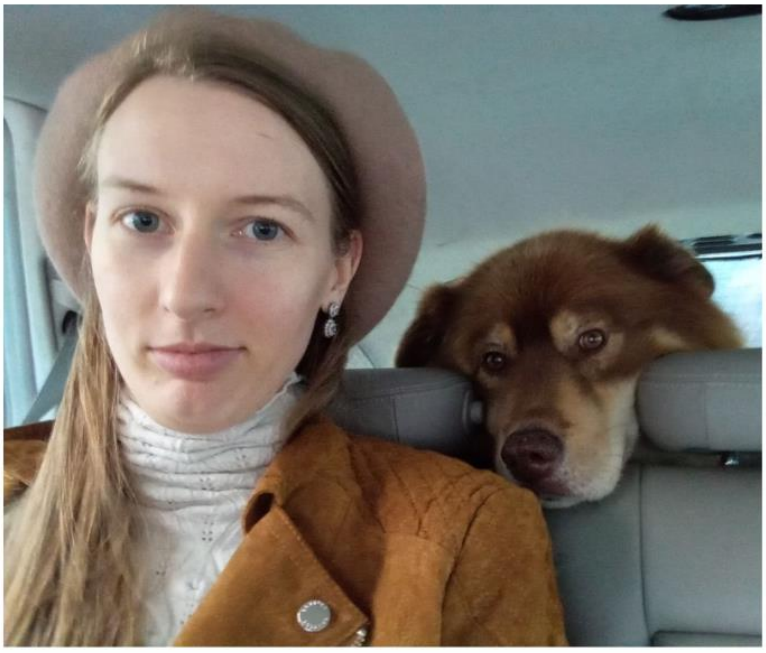
ISSUE 16

"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

My good people. Have a good look at the shire of Wilts, and some of Jane Austen's poetry. Lots of interest in the Dates of Importance section too. Long live the dinos.

Let's start this issue's stories with the insanity of Medugal, with *The Puzzle Box*. Hope this will keep you up at night. Luke Gilfedder joins us again with another extract from his impending novel, *Die When I Say When*, this time labeled *The Noble Art of Venerie*. Apparently venerie is fox hunting. In French. No foxes were harmed in the writing of the story, though the same could not be said about the making of the magazine. Naturally, AR Duncan cannot be dissuaded from his continuing story and *Eagle's Flight* number 6 is now foisted upon us.

Keeping us on the edge of our seats is AR Green with part 5 of *A Song of Spring: A Sword Fit for a King* titled: *The Edge of their World*. *The Monkey's Paw* by WW Jacobs fights *The Severed Hand* by Wilhelm Hauffff for literary supremacy. A twisted tale by Rosamond Langbridge titled *The Backstairs of the Mind* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Ethan Brand*, or possibly Ethan Brand's *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (I am not quite sure), complete this mag.

Since our last meeting, I have brought out the L&A Catalogue. You can view it for free on the website corncrakemag.com or purchase a physical edition on Etsy, under the shop CorncrakeMag. It is a collection of the finest literature, art, and fashion available for purchase.

Call of the Shieldmaiden
Editor-in-Chief

Wiltshire

Wiltshire (Wilts) is a ceremonial county in South West England. The largest settlement is Swindon, and Trowbridge is the county town. After Swindon, the largest settlements are the city of Salisbury and the towns of Chippenham and Trowbridge . Chalk downlands characterize much of the county. In the east are Marlborough Downs, which contain Savernake Forest. To the south is the Vale of Pewsey, which separates the downs from Salisbury Plain in the centre of the county. The south-west is also downland, and contains the West Wiltshire Downs, the Vale of Wardour to their south, and part of Cranborne Chase in the far south of the county. The north-west of Wiltshire is part of the Cotswolds, a limestone area. The county's two major rivers are both called the Avon; the northern Avon enters the county in the north-west and flows in a south-westerly direction before leaving it near Bradford-on-Avon, and the southern Avon rises on Salisbury Plain and flows through Salisbury, then into Hampshire. The far south-east contains part of the New Forest. Salisbury Plain is noted for the Stonehenge and Avebury stone circles. Much of the plain is a training area for the British Army.

The Wiltshire flag depicts the emblem of a great bustard (Otis tarda) in gold on a solid green circle. The rim of this circle consists of six sections in alternate green and white. These evoke the famous stone circles of Stonehenge and Avebury, while also representing Wiltshire's six neighbouring counties. Behind this emblem lies a field of alternate green and white wavy lines, which represent the county's open grassland and underlying chalk.

Dates of Importance

World Dinosaur Day in the UK is celebrated on **June 1st** and offers a variety of ways to celebrate and learn about these fascinating prehistoric creatures. You can visit dinosaur museums such as the Natural History Museum in London, which is famed for its dinosaur collection, though the famous Dippy the diplodocus has gone back home to Coventry. The National Museum of Scotland also has a 12-metre long, life-size skeleton cast of a T-rex. Additionally, you can attend events like Dinosaur World Live, a touring show that brings dinosaurs to life with amazing puppetry and heaps of excitement. For a fun day out with the kids, consider visiting Dinosaur Isle on the Isle of Wight or Crystal Palace Park Dinosaurs in London. You can also participate in activities at home, such as giving family members dinosaur names for the day and having a dinosaur-themed breakfast.

St Justin's Day is celebrated on **June 1st** in the Church of England as a Lesser Festival. This day commemorates Justin Martyr, an early Christian apologist and philosopher who lived in the 2nd century AD. He is remembered for his contributions to Christian theology and his martyrdom, which took place around 165 AD. In medieval England, feast days were significant events that marked the lives of saints and were often celebrated with various activities. While specific details about how St Justin's Day was celebrated in medieval times are not extensively documented, it is likely that it followed a similar pattern to other feast days. These celebrations typically included church services, processions, and communal gatherings. The celebration of feast days in medieval England was deeply rooted in the liturgical calendar and served multiple purposes. They provided a break from daily routines, offered opportunities for communal worship and reflection, and reinforced the spiritual and cultural identity of the community. Since St Justin's Day is a Lesser Festival, it may not have been as widely celebrated or recognized as major feast days like Christmas or Easter. However, it would still have been observed in churches and monasteries dedicated to his memory. Today, St Justin's Day is commemorated but may not be as widely celebrated as it was in medieval times. The Church of England continues to observe it as a Lesser Festival, reflecting its historical and theological significance.

Saint Boniface, born Wynfrith around 675 in Crediton, Devon, England, had significant ties to his homeland despite spending much of his life as a missionary in Germany. He is remembered in the Church of England with a Lesser Festival on **June 5**, the date of his martyrdom in 754. Boniface's life and work are celebrated in Crediton, where a major shrine is dedicated to him at St Boniface Catholic Church. Additionally, in 2019, Devon County Council, along with various religious leaders, officially recognized St Boniface as the Patron Saint of Devon. Boniface's early life and education in England laid the foundation for his later missionary work. He received a religious education from his earliest years and showed great ability, which led him to the Benedictine monasteries of Adescancastre under Abbot Winbert. His correspondence and connections with England throughout his life indicate the importance of his English roots and the support he received from his countrymen.

Saint Norbert, **June 6**, born around 1075, is not directly associated with England, but his influence extended to Northern Europe, including areas that were part of England's historical and ecclesiastical connections. He is known for founding the Norbertine order, also known as the Premonstratensians, which spread across Northern Europe, including regions that were under English ecclesiastical influence during his time. Additionally, his work in reforming the Church and his travels to Rome could have indirectly impacted English religious practices and institutions of the period. In England, Saint Norbert's Catholic Primary School in Spalding, Lincolnshire, is an example of how Saint Norbert's legacy is carried forward in educational institutions. This school, like others named after saints, aims to integrate Catholic faith traditions with national educational standards, fostering a spiritual and academic environment for students.
Saint Norbert is also recognized as a patron saint for safe childbirth and is invoked for the well-being of pregnant women and unborn children, which is a universal aspect of his veneration and not specific to England.

St Barnabas Day is celebrated on **June 11th**. Traditionally, churches were decorated with garlands of flowers such as roses, woodruff, and lavender. In the 15th and 16th centuries, maidens would go "gathering" for church funds, and money was paid out for "bread, wine and ale for the singers of the King's Chapel and for the clerks of the town". St Barnabas, whose real name was Joseph, was a first-century disciple of Jesus and a Levite from the island of Cyprus. He was given the nickname Barnabas, which means 'son of encouragement', for his supportive and welcoming nature.7 He is known for his generosity, having sold his land and given the proceeds to the church in Jerusalem. He also introduced Paul the Apostle to the apostles after Paul's conversion. St Barnabas is celebrated for his role in encouraging the early Christian community and for his missionary work with Paul. He is remembered for his kindness and encouragement towards others, especially those who were outsiders or had made mistakes.

St Botolph's Day is celebrated in England on **June 17th**, though in Scotland it is observed on **June 25th**. The day honors St Botolph, an English abbot and saint who is regarded as the patron saint of boundaries, trade, travel, and various aspects of farming. Little is known about his life, but he is believed to have been born in the early 7th century and founded the monastery of Icanho, which was later identified as Iken in Suffolk. In medieval times, St Botolph's Day was likely celebrated with church services and community gatherings, as it was common for feast days of saints to be marked with religious observance and local festivities. However, specific details about how the day was celebrated in medieval England are limited in the provided context. Churches dedicated to St Botolph, such as St Botolph's Church in Hardham, West Sussex, which houses some of the most ancient surviving wall paintings in Britain, would have been central to the celebrations. These churches would have been focal points for the community to come together and honor the saint. The significance of St Botolph's Day lies in the veneration of a local saint who was associated with the development of land and agriculture, which were crucial aspects of medieval life. His patronage of boundaries and trade also made him an important figure for the protection and prosperity of the community.

St. Romuald of Ravenna's feast day is celebrated on **June 19th**, the anniversary of his death. This day is recognized in the Catholic Church and by the Camaldolese Order, which he founded. In the medieval UK, the celebration of St. Romuald's feast day would have been part of the broader liturgical calendar. Monasteries and churches would have held special masses and liturgical services to honor St. Romuald. These services would have included prayers, hymns, and readings from the life of St. Romuald, emphasizing his role as a hermit and monastic reformer. Given St. Romuald's emphasis on penance and asceticism, some monastic communities might have observed fasting or other forms of penitence on this day. Monks and nuns might have gathered for communal meals or special gatherings to reflect on St. Romuald's teachings and legacy. In some cases, pilgrimages to sites associated with St. Romuald, such as monasteries or hermitages he founded, might have taken place. Spiritual Inspiration: St. Romuald's life and teachings served as a source of spiritual inspiration for monastic communities. His emphasis on solitude, contemplation, and reform of monastic life resonated with the ideals of medieval monasticism. St. Romuald was a significant figure in the 11th-century "Renaissance of eremitical asceticism." His reforms and the establishment of the Camaldolese Order contributed to the broader movement of monastic reform in Europe. Hermitage and Solitude: His dedication to the hermit life and the integration of hermitage with monastic community life provided a model for other hermits and monastics. This model was particularly influential in the development of later monastic orders, such as the Carthusians and Cistercians. Cultural and Religious Significance: The celebration of St. Romuald's feast day was part of the rich tapestry of medieval religious and cultural life, reinforcing the importance of saints and their contributions to the Church and society. While the specific details of how St. Romuald's feast day was celebrated in medieval England are not extensively documented, the general practices of liturgical services, fasting, community gatherings, and pilgrimages would have been common ways to honor his memory and legacy.

Litha, also known as the Summer Solstice, is celebrated in the UK as a time to honor the peak of the sun's power and the longest day of the year. In 2025, Litha will fall on Friday, **June 20th**. Traditions include connecting with nature, performing rituals such as lighting candles and making offerings to deities, and gathering with friends and family to share food, drinks, and music. Communities often celebrate with hilltop bonfires, dancing, and jumping over the flames for good luck. Additionally, some people decorate their homes with wildflowers and make fairy offerings to honor the season's folklore and mythology.

Midsummer's Eve: medieval. Celebrated on **June 23**, which was an important celebration marking the summer solstice. It included customs such as the wet fire ceremony, where a lit candle was placed in a boat and released in a stream or pool of water. If the boat made it to the other side with the candle still lit, the wish would be granted. The feast ended with a dance called Threading the Needle around the bonfire.

Saint John the Baptist Day, celebrated on **June 24**, is an important feast day in England, commemorating the birth of John the Baptist. Traditionally, this day involves the lighting of bonfires, known as "Saint John's fires," which symbolize the transition of the sun's height and length of the day, reflecting the themes of increase and decrease as stated in John 3.6 In medieval times, three types of fires were lit: a bonfire made of clean bones, a wakefire of clean wood, and a St John's Fire made of both bones and wood. Additionally, churches hold special services, and it is one of the quarter days in England.

Jane Austen Regency Week is celebrated in the UK to honour the life, times, and works of the beloved author Jane Austen and to explore the rich cultural heritage of the Regency era. This nine-day festival takes place annually in Alton, Chawton, and Selborne in Hampshire, UK, and it occurs in the **third week of June** each year. The celebration features a variety of activities, including historical talks, theatrical performances, guided walks, and Regency-era dances. These events offer enthusiasts a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in the world of Jane Austen and explore her enduring legacy. Visitors are encouraged to dress in Regency attire to fully embrace the spirit of the event. Some of the events are run by registered charities that receive ticket income as part of their fundraising activities, such as Jane Austen's House Museum (CIO), Chawton House, Hampshire Cultural Trust, Gilbert White and the Oates Collections, and The Parochial Church Council of the Ecclesiastical Parish of the Resurrection, Alton. The festival is organized by a group of volunteers and participating organizations under the auspices of the Alton Jane Austen Group and is funded through ticket sales, grants, sponsorship, and advertising. Jane Austen spent much of her life in Hampshire, where she wrote her most famous novels, including Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, and Emma. The festival celebrates both her life and the historical period in which she lived, encouraging people to explore their cultural heritage.

Saint Peter is celebrated alongside Saint Paul on **29 June**, known as the **Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul**. This joint feast day is more widely observed and commemorates the martyrdom of both apostles. Churches in the UK often hold special masses and services to honor Saint Peter and Saint Paul. These services may include readings from the New Testament, prayers, and hymns. Some parishes and communities organize events such as processions, community meals, and educational activities to teach about the lives and legacies of Saints Peter and Paul. Many believers use these days for personal reflection and prayer, focusing on the themes of faith, leadership, and martyrdom that are central to the lives of Saints Peter and Paul. It is celebrated because of Recognition of Leadership: Saint Peter is recognized as the first Pope and a foundational figure in the early Christian Church. His leadership and faith are celebrated as examples for all Christians. Both Saints Peter and Paul were martyred for their faith, and their courage and dedication are honored on 29 June. Their lives and deaths are seen as powerful testimonies to the strength of Christian belief. The joint celebration of Saints Peter and Paul on 29 June emphasizes the unity of the Church and the importance of community in Christian life. These celebrations serve to remind believers of the rich history and traditions of the Christian faith, and to inspire them to live their lives with the same commitment and faith as Saints Peter and Paul.

Ode To Pity

By Jane Austin

Ever musing I delight to tread
The Paths of honour and the Myrtle Grove
Whilst the pale Moon her beams doth shed
On disappointed Love.
While Philomel on airy hawthorn Bush
Sings sweet and Melancholy, And the thrush
Converses with the Dove.

Gently brawling down the turnpike road,
Sweetly noisy falls the Silent Stream—
The Moon emerges from behind a Cloud
And darts upon the Myrtle Grove her beam.
Ah! then what Lovely Scenes appear,
The hut, the Cot, the Grot, and Chapel queer,
And eke the Abbey too a mouldering heap,
Conceal'd by aged pines her head doth rear
And quite invisible doth take a peep.

Happy The Lab'rer

By Jane Austin

Happy the lab'rer in his Sunday clothes!
In light-drab coat, smart waistcoat, well-darn'd hose,
And hat upon his head, to church he goes;
As oft, with conscious pride, he downward throws
A glance upon the ample cabbage rose
That, stuck in button-hole, regales his nose,
He envies not the gayest London beaux.
In church he takes his seat among the rows,
Pays to the place the reverence he owes,
Likes best the prayers whose meaning least he knows,
Lists to the sermon in a softening doze,
And rouses joyous at the welcome close.

The Puzzle Box

Medugal

He sat fiddling with the box on his bed, as he had been on and off for the past few hours. It was a small metal object about the size of a small lunch box, but perfectly square and heavy, dense. He had found it sitting in an old antique shop as he wandered about not looking for anything in particular.

"Good luck getting into that" the shop keeper had remarked.

He had lugged it along, praying his bag didn't tear on the way home, as the cube bashed and bounced into his back, corners digging into his spine and stretching the fabric of his rucksack. It had taken two hands to heave it out and onto the pillow on his bed (the bed being a safer choice, fearing it might damage the desk). He didn't know how old it was and there was no writing or maker's marks that might give him any clues, but it was precision made leaving no seams or lines between the panels that made up the sides.

He ran his fingers along the intricate lines etched into every inch of the grey metallic surface, feeling for loose sections that slid or twisted or rotated. He turned corners and tugged at edges and followed the spiralling, looping lines and symbols that wove their way around the entire object. The faces didn't spin or slide and there were no holes or cracks to poke a pin into. He was starting to wonder if it was even a puzzle at all, as nothing he searched for online had given him any hints as to how to crack this thing.

Finally in frustration he tried brute forcing the metal faces apart, only to catch the edge of his thumb on one of the sharp corners. He hurled the cube to the floor with a thud, before sucking at the blood that had begun to ooze out of the thin gash on the side of his knuckle. He felt the warm metallic taste dance on his tongue and the sharp sting in his thumb. He also noticed a different taste, something he didn't recognise, a bright and warm taste - maybe a polish or oil or chemical used on the box. It began to intrigue him as he picked the cube back up and started sniffing at the surface and prodding around at the edges, trying to find a culprit for his injured digit. The box smelled as most metal objects do, that is very little, and there didn't seem to be any residue left on the surface that he could detect. He ran his index across the surface and, not smelling anything, touched it to his tongue.

It was faint but could definitely taste that warm sweet taste as before and through utter compulsion he had decided he had to taste the box directly as he gazed down at the silver edge of the cube that shone back at him. He poked out his tongue and slowly touched it to the cold metallic point of the puzzle that rested between his hands on his lap. Immediately his mind burst with colours and sounds and visions, like a great book opening or concert starting as he pressed his tongue down further to the surface. He ran his tongue along the grooves and around the symbols and engravings like a record player pulling music from the face of the box. The further he went the further the story unfolded, and the box told him its story. He saw faces of previous owners and places that box had been, he felt the hands that had touched it and smelled rooms it had lived in. He followed the complex paths that ran the entire skin of the puzzle and when his tongue met with patches of blood left by his neglected thumb, new dimensions were unlocked and the cube spilled forth its secrets.

The box instructed him along as he gripped his teeth into the hard surface of one of the corners and felt them sink smoothly into a groove previously unseen. The corner twisted and the face unlatched and swung a panel open on invisible hinges to reveal a new face of the cube with more markings that merged and flowed with the stories previously told. The panel was the thickness of a match stick and held even more riddles on its inside. So on he went licking and tasting the latest clues that had been revealed to him, learning more secrets and opening more panels and unfolding the box. He peeled the box apart layer by layer like an onion, each time learning deeper and darker knowledge that only left him hungrier for more. He unfolded the boxes around and around until his bed was covered by these interlocking plates into one large, interconnected sheet of metal with it's web of stories and symbols like a great esoteric jigsaw puzzle, but yet the box remained the same size and with all its knowledge locked deep inside.

His tongue was red and sore as he dragged the steel tablet on blankets to the floor for more space. He squeezed his thumb into the cracks and watched the blood flow into all the arcane patterns and runes which he licked up, feeling worlds spin past his eyes. He saw dark figures and clandestine meetings, talks between powerful people, money men and world leaders. He watched schemes and plots unfold, and great chains of circumstance unravels through all the ages of history. Through the night he worked, until his fingertips were like fire and his nails were splintered and broken, but the pain was always worth it. His thumb had stopped providing and so he took a knife to his hand, the agony was almost pleasurable with the knowledge of what was to come. The floor was almost entirely covered at this point and what little of the carpet was still visible was soaked in blood as he clawed and gnawed and licked and scraped at the metal. Some of his teeth had cracked and chipped against the steel and his fingers were worn down to the bone, but this only added further dimensions as he was pulled into the minds of people past and present, he felt all their greatest pleasures and read straight from their minds. As he ground his stumpy fingers into the coarse surface and lapped at the red pulp, he experienced life in eons past and watched futures unfold that have yet to be told, and yet he was still so far from finishing this story and the mysteries the cube had to offer.

Every part of himself sacrificed was a new insight, a new joy, and really what sacrifice could be too great for all of space and time and every human wish and desire. His tongue had become so frayed that he could hardly use it any longer and so he bit down into it hard, offering it up to the cube, feeling the excitement rush through him as he dribbled out blood and saliva on to the grand map of the universe sprawled out underneath him. His eyes were blurry from blood loss, but that was ok, he didn't need his eyes to see, his knees and toes, fingers and

elbows were worn and flayed, but that was ok, he didn't need fingers to touch, as he lowered himself down on his tatty crimson stumps and pressed his split, cracked lips to the metal and began to slurp. On he went – grating and gushing and sucking through the night. The greatest play that was ever and will ever be written and the final act, where all the mysteries will be revealed and the finest pleasures felt, so close you can almost taste it.

The Noble Art of Venerie

Extract from *Die When I Say When*

Luke Gilfedder

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

But as Quinn *races to gather evidence against his old friend, he begins to question whether any murders have, in fact, taken place. Instead, Falin may be involved in an even more sinister mystery—one that ensnares Quinn in a tangled web whose fatal threads cast further than he could ever have imagined, yet whose answer lies deep within the ancient Cheshire escarpment of Alderley Edge...*

Late one Childermass, a black-suited, redheaded six-footer descended the steps of Manchester Victoria Station. He twitched his Celto-Lancastrian nose like a rabbit. A storm was coming—one of those Pentecostal storms native to these hills and neo-gothic spires, tall as obelisks—when dams burst, roofs are torn away, squares flood, and every lead pipe becomes a fountain. He hailed a taxi and gave an Alderley Edge address. They drove south through Moss Side and Hulme, the angry red-brick terraces darkening to purple. Sure enough, after a few hours of winter sun, Manchester was creaking back into its rainy groove like a tram proudly regaining its rails. Streetlights clicked on as the mazy alleys of Hulme gradually unravelled into semi-suburbia and the open road of Princess Parkway; the man reclined, watching the skyline of his youth recede in the rear-view mirror, blurring to a Lowry-like thickening of twilight itself.

Nightfall brought them to the summit of the Edge. Bronchial trees soared high in the darkness, and mediaeval-ish lampposts held aloft wavering haloes of golden drizzle. The driver said, “People think Cheshire is as flat as a pancake, but it sure ain’t here.” The detached mass of the Edge stood alone on the Cheshire Plain, six hundred feet high and three miles long. It was tall, sombre, and dark. Estates crept down its slopes, stepping on their own shadows.

The taxi descended through a yellow fog, and the village of Alderley emerged below, looking like a child’s toy town at the foot of the Edge. It was the “best” postcode in Cheshire: Cheshire’s Kensington, its Linlithgow, its Sandycove, its Charlottenlund, and (to the Welsh at least) its Cowbridge. Alderley held that aura of old halls, fallen fortunes, and county families familiar to so many of too many English autobiographers— something much rarer in the North than the South, the redheaded man knew, though he found it only mildly less intolerable. During the day, the village hummed with Range Rovers and Rolls-Royces, chattering café-goers, and cashmere-draped ramblers trampling down the dead leaves. But at dusk, such life withered in a moment. Then, the sounds became those of the Edge: the crystal tongues of water and nightingale, and the heathen murmurings of Roman mines and druid’s bones lay beneath the marl.

Their foglights dipped and bleared as the fog thickened down the cobbled steep of Woodbrook Road. The decline soon levelled onto Mottram Lane, and the taxi, finally shaking off the shadow of the Edge, made for the village. Sleet lashed against their windows, tearing the streetlight into golden shrapnel. The driver said,

"Can't make up its bleeding mind: rain one day, ice the next. Be pissing down again tomorrow."

Quinn Roseblade did not reply. He did not mind the cabbie's familiarity, but he wasn't the type to answer a curt ‘yes’ to such observations, nor to reply with some hackneyed phrase. The driver, sensing Quinn’s silence was not meant as a snub, went on:

"Still, if it sticks, be nice for the kids to get some snow finally..."

They slued onto the festive-lit high street. A few Bruegel-like figures, necks swathed in mufflers, stalked about like plump wraiths. The sight reminded Quinn of Bruges last winter, and he shivered. He wasn’t thinking about the snow falling in the Markt, nor of the belfry tolling its black and Catholic chimes, but of that eerily familiar figure slipping through the mist and silhouettes. He shivered again. The driver continued:

“Not being nosy, but I’ve seen you before somewhere, haven’t I?”

"An article about me in the papers, perhaps. Or rather," Quinn clarified wearily, "about my play. It's opening at the Exchange this week.”

“That's it, the playwright!” the driver answered with raised (or over-raised) eyebrows. A young man who lived on his WITS — what! — a label which, harmless as it may sound to foreign ears, somehow in England imputes upon a person a moral ambiguity. “I knew I'd seen your face before—you were in *Cheshire Life*, weren't you? The missus reads it. How old are you, son, if you don't mind my asking?”

“Just turned twenty-eight.”

"Twenty-eight..." he let out a low whistle. “You're doing well for yourself, then. If I were twenty-eight again—and thank Christ that I’m not because I simply couldn’t afford it, I’d— “

The cabbie kept talking, but Quinn stopped listening. The rain was provoking memories, too many memories, encouraging them to unfold like those Japanese flowers which open in water. The taxi’s foglamps glanced the long, dark drive of Legh Hall Grammar, and Quinn was suddenly that bursary boy again, stood alone in his drenched blazar, stifling a gasp as the gates swung open, his life dividing before him as neatly as Roald Dahl’s *Boy* and *Going Solo*...

After passing the school, they took a sharp left but got stopped by the lights at Station Bridge. The driver swore, lit a cigarette, and resigned himself to watching the windscreen wipers battle the sleet. Quinn leaned against the window, listening to the swish of tyres on the wet road. He saw the horseshoe of a crowd outside the De Lynn Hotel, admiring a Daimler Limousine parked before the steps, its mirror-black body agleam in the golden light spilling from the lobby. The driver said, following his gaze,

“That’ll be old money. It ain’t all footballers ‘round here...”

From the lobby, two men emerged. The younger one strode forth, slim and defiant, while the elder hunched, Nosferatu-style, in his dark raincape. They might have been grandfather and grandson. The young man eased the elder into the Daimler, but as he closed the door, he noticed Quinn’s taxi and froze, poised like a stag at bay. Quinn felt a stab of recognition and was about to leap out and shout, “Wait!” when the youth vanished into the Daimler. All things thawed to action—the Daimler swept out of the driveway, cleared its throat,

and, with a tremendous purr, glided off toward the lofty manors of Nether Alderley.

The traffic lights remained mulishly red. To the driver, Quinn said:

"Would you pull into that hotel, please?"

"But we're almost at Davey Lane!"

"Do it. It's urgent."

The taxi did a slick one-eighty into De Lynn's driveway. Above the Tudor-gabled roof, smoky clouds swirled in triskelions. Quinn jumped out and, realising he had left his satchel on the back seat, called,

"Wait for me here. I shan't be long."

He strode up the steps and into the lobby before the concierge even had a chance to bow. With a quick smile, he approached the brunette at the desk.

"Excuse me; the young man who just left—have you seen him before? Is he staying here? He's… he's an old school friend."

She flicked hair from her pentathletic brow. "Gosh, I couldn't say. We've been super busy tonight; it's our Twixmas buffet. We've got Potted Pigeon, sir, Fidget Pie, Michaelmas Goose, Chester Pud—"

"Sounds lovely," Quinn put in, "but could I just see a guest list?"

The girl ruched her eyebrows and said she'd go fetch it. Quinn waited, tapping his foot and cursing his redheaded impulsivity. After all, he'd only seen the man thirty yards away through a rain-spattered window. It couldn't possibly be him… could it? The receptionist returned with the list. Quinn scanned it but shook his head. In a conciliatory tone, she added,

"We *did* have a last-minute booking from an older gent— he might not be on that list. I guess he was with his grandson; I think he called him Calvin?"

"Calvin? Might you have misheard— could it have been Falin? Falin Mac Naught?"

"*Maaaybe*? I'm not sure. But if you leave your number, I'll let you know if they come again. It's Quinn, isn't it?"

"You know my name?"

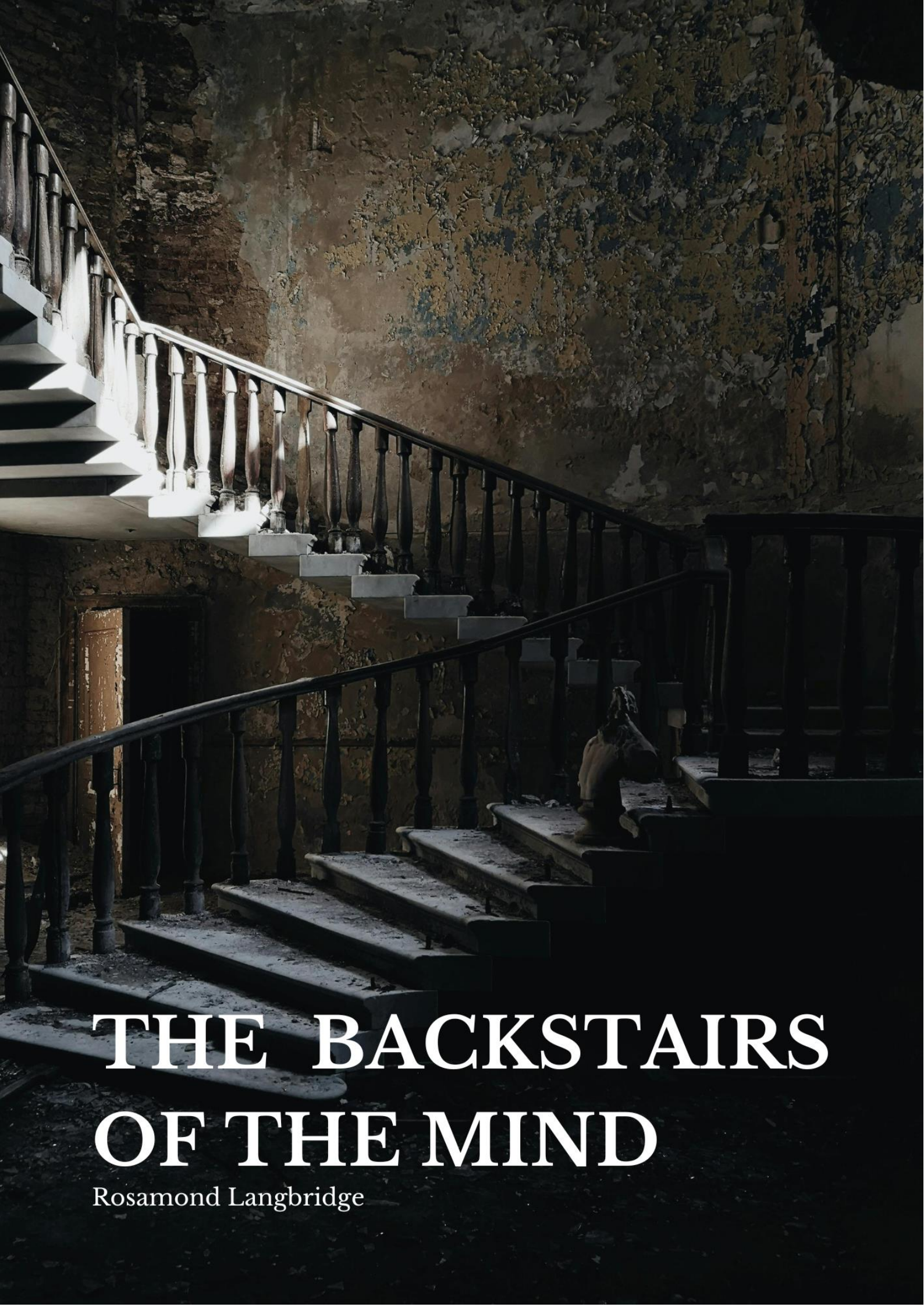
Insincerely grinning, she said, "Yeah, of course! I read about your play in the paper. The one that rhymes with…" she blushed. "Oh, how do you pronounce it again?"

"Vi-nay-she-oh," Quinn said, quickly dashing off his number. "Do call me if you find anything."

He left the lobby, thoughts of Falin obscuring the anonymous farewells of women that pursued him down the steps. Taxis idled before him, their keen patches of light wavering across the slush. His own was waiting. He slid in. The driver asked,

"Find what you were looking for, sir?"

"Not yet, but I will," Quinn replied, as 'vi-nay-she-oh' rebounded in his mind. *Vēnātiō*: the hunt. They taught Latin well at Legh Hall Grammar.



THE BACKSTAIRS OF THE MIND

Rosamond Langbridge

Patrick Deasey described himself as a "philosopher, psychologist, and humorist." It was partly because Patrick delighted in long words, and partly to excuse himself for being full of the sour cream of an inhuman curiosity. His curiosity, however, did not extend itself to science and *belles lettres*; it concerned itself wholly with the affairs of other people. At first, when Deasey retired from the police force with a pension and an heiress with three hundred pounds, and time hung heavy on his hands, he would try to satisfy this craving through the medium of a host of small flirtations with everybody's maid. In this way he could inform himself exactly how many loaves were taken by the Sweeneys for a week's consumption, as compared with those which were devoured by all the Cassidys; for whom the bottles at the Presbytery went in by the back door; and what was the real cause of the quarrel between the twin Miss McInerneys.

But these were but blackbird-scratchings, as it were, upon the deep soil of the human heart. What Deasey cared about was what he called "the secrets of the soul."

"Never met a man," he was wont to say, "with no backstairs to his mind! And the quieter, decenter, respectabler, innocenter a man looked—like enough!—the darker those backstairs!"

It was up these stairs he craved to go. To ring at the front door of ordinary intercourse was not enough for him. When Deasey invested his wife's money in a public-house he developed a better plan. It was the plan which made him ultimately describe himself as a humorist. He would wait until the bar was deserted by all but the one lingering victim whom his trained eye had picked out. Then, rolling that same eye about him, as though to make quite sure no other living creature was in sight, he would gently close the door of the bar-parlour, pick up a tumbler, breathe on it, polish the breath, lean one elbow on the bar, look round him once again, and, setting the whisky-bottle betwixt his customer and himself, with a nod which said "Help yourself," he would lean forward, with the soft indulgent grin of the human man-of-the-world, and begin:

"Now, don't distress yourself, me dear man, but as between frien's, certain delicate little—facts—in your past life have come inadvertently to me hearing."

Sometimes he would allude to a "certain document," or "incriminating facts," or "certain letters"—he would ring the changes on these three, according to the sex and temperament with which he had to deal. But always, whatever the words, whatever the nature or sex, the shot would tell. First came the little start, the straightened figure, the pallor or flush, the shamed and suddenly-lit eyes, and then—

"Who told you, Mr. Deasey, sir?" Or "Where did you get the letter?"

"Ah, now, that would be telling!" Deasey would make reply. "But 'twas from a *certain person* whom, perhaps, we need not name!" Then the whiskey-bottle would move forward, like a pawn in chess, and the next soothing words would be, "Help yourself now—don't be shy, me dear man! And—your secret is safe with me!"

Forthwith the little skeleton in that man's cupboard would lean forward and press upon the door, until at last the door flew open and a bone or two, and sometimes the whole skeleton, would rattle out upon the floor.

He had played this game so often, that, almost at first sight he could classify his dupes under the three heads into which he had divided them: Those who demanded with violent threats—(which melted like snow before the sunshine of John Jamieson) the letter, or the name of the informant; those who asked, after a gentle sip or two how the letter had come into his hands, and those who asked immediately if the letter hadn't been destroyed. As a rule, from the type that demanded the letter back, he only caught sight of the tip of the secret's ears. From those—they were nearly always the women—who swiftly asked if he hadn't destroyed the letters, he caught shame-faced gleams of the truth.

But those who asked between pensive sips, how the facts or the letter had come his way, these were the ones who yielded Deasey the richest harvest of rattling skeleton bones.

Indeed, it was curiously instructive how John Jamieson laid down a causeway of gleaming stepping-stones, so that Deasey might cross lightly over the turgid waters of his victims' souls. At the words, accompanied by John Jamieson—"A certain dark page of your past history—help yourself, me boy!—has been inadvertently revealed to me, but is for ever sacred in me breast!"—it was strange to see how, from the underworld of the man's mind, there would trip out the company of misshapen hobgoblins and gnomes which had been locked away in darkness, maybe, this many a year.

"Well—how would I get the time to clane the childer and to wash their heads, and I working all the day at curing stinkin' hides! 'Twas Herself should have got it, and Herself alone!"...

Or—

"No, I never done it, for all me own mother sworn I did. I only give the man a little push—that way!—and he fell over on the side, and busted all his veins!"

Or—

"Well, an' wouldn't you draw two pinsions yourself, Mr. Deasey, if you'd a wife with two han's like a sieve for yellow gold!"

But there were some confessions, haltingly patchy and inadequate, but hauntingly suggestive, which Deasey could neither piece out on the spot, nor yet unravel in the small hours of the night. There was one of this nature which troubled his rest long:

"Well, the way of it was, you see, he put it up the chimbley, but when the chimbley-sweepers come he transferred it in his weskit to my place, and I dropped it down the well. They found it when they let the bucket down, but I wasn't his accomplice at all, 'twas only connivance with me!"

When he had spoken of the chimney and the well Deasey concluded at once it was a foully murdered corpse. But then, again, you could not well conceal a corpse in someone's waistcoat; and gold coins would melt or be mislaid amongst the loose bricks of a sooty chimney. Deasey had craved for corpses, but nothing so

grim as that had risen to his whisky-bait until he tried the same old game on Mrs. Geraghty. What subtle instinct was it that had prompted him to add to the first unvarying words: "But all that is now past and over, and safe beneath the mouldering clay!"

At these last words, the Widow Geraghty knew well, the barrier was down that fences off one human soul from another; all the same, she shook her trembling head when Deasey drew the cork. At her refusal Deasey was struck with the most respectful compassion; until that hour he had never known one single lacerated soul decline this consolation.

"And to look at me!" she wept forthwith, "would you think I could shed a drop of ruddy gore?"

"No, ma'am," returned Deasey. "To look at you, ye'd think ma'am ye could never kill a fly!"

And respectfully he passed the peppermints.

"Sometimes," the widow muttered, "I hears it, and it bawling in me dreams o' night. And the two bright eyes of it, and the little clay cold feet!" Deasey knew what was coming now, and he twitched in every vein. And she so white-haired and so regular at church: and the black bonnet on the head of her, an' all! "It was the only little one she had," went on the widow, bowed almost to the bar by shame, "and it always perched up on her knee, and taking food from her mouth, and she nursing it agin her face. But I had bad teeth in me head, and I couldn't get my rest, with the jaws aching, and all the whiles it screeching with the croup. 'Twould madden you!"

"All the same," Deasey whispered, "maybe it wasn't your fault: 'twas maybe your man egged you on to do the shameful deed——"

"It was so," said the widow. "'Let you get up and cut its throat,' says he, 'and then we will be shut of the domned screechin' thing.'" "Then you got the knife, ma'am," prompted Deasey. "It was the bread-knife," she answered, "with the ugly notches in the blade,—and I stole in the back way to her place in the dead hours of the night—and I had me apron handy for to quench the cries; and when I c'ot it be the throat didn't it look up at me with the two bright, innocent eyes!"

"And what'd you do with the body?" he asked.

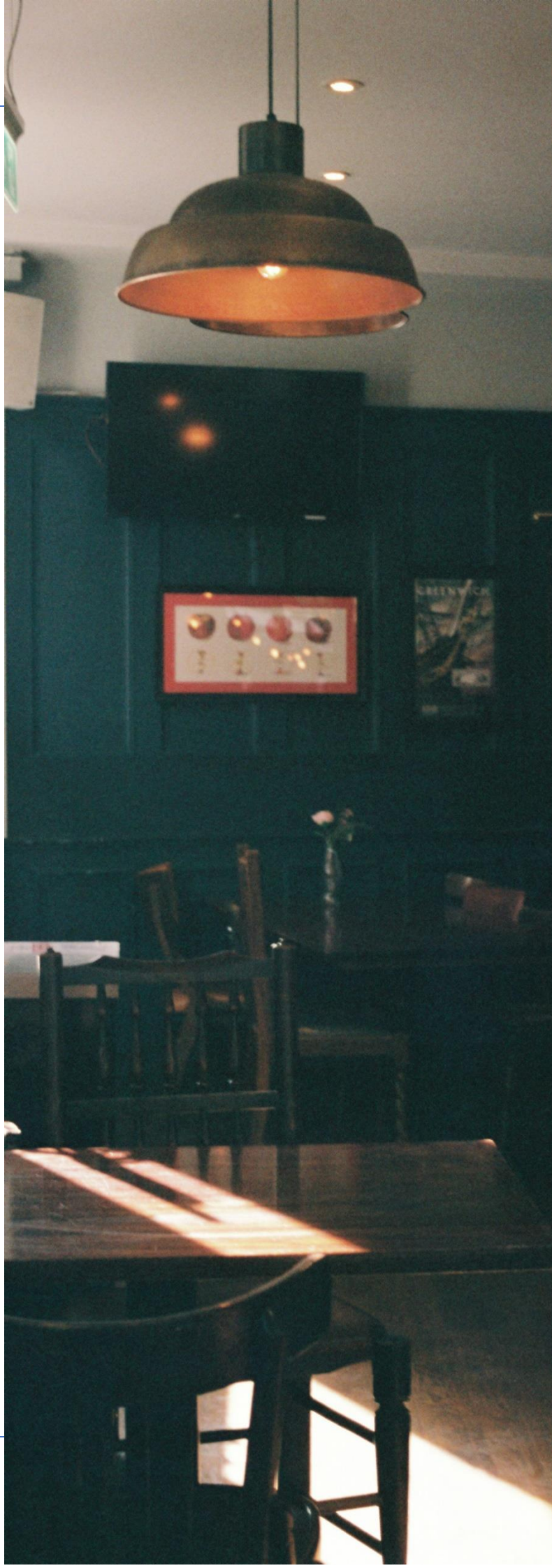
"I dug a grave in the shine of the moon," she answered. "And I put it in by the two little cold grey feet——"

This touch of the grey feet laid a spell on Deasey's hankering morbidity.

"*What turned the feet grey*?" he whispered.

"Nature, I s'pose!" replied the white-haired widow. She drew her shawl about her shrinking form before she turned away.

"'Twas never found out, from that hour to this, who done it!" muttered the Widow Geraghty, "but, may the Divvle skelp me if I touch one drop of chucken-tea again!"



The Severed Hand

Wilhelm Hauff

Wilhelm Hauff was a German poet and novelist born on November 29, 1802, in Stuttgart. Hauff received much of his early education in the library of his maternal grandfather at Tübingen. In 1818, he was sent to the Klosterschule at Blaubeuren, and in 1820, he began his studies at the University of Tübingen, where he completed his philosophical and theological studies, graduating with a PhD. Hauff became a tutor to the children of General Baron Ernst Eugen von Hugel, the Württemberg minister of war, and wrote his famous fairy tales for them. These tales were published in his Märchen Almanach auf das Jahr 1826 (Fairytale Almanac of 1826) and gained lasting popularity. In January 1827, he took on the editorship of the Stuttgart Morgenblatt. His was cut short when he died from typhoid fever on November 18, 1827, at the age of 24. His collected works, including a biography, were published posthumously in 1830.

I was born at Constantinople, where my father was a dragoman to the Sublime Porte, and carried on, besides, a tolerably lucrative trade in perfumes and silks. He gave me a good education, partly instructing me himself, and partly engaging a priest of our religion for that purpose. He originally intended me for his own business, but, as I displayed greater talents than he expected, he determined, by the advice of his friends, to make me a physician, being of opinion that a physician, if he has learned more than the common charlatans, could make his fortune in Constantinople.

Our house was frequented by many Franks, one of whom urged my father to let me go to the city of Paris, in his native country, where people might study such things gratis, and in the best manner, saying he would take me with him for nothing when he returned thither.

My father, who in his youth had also travelled, agreed, and the Frank told me to be ready in three months. I was delighted beyond measure at the prospect of seeing foreign lands, and could scarcely await the time when we should embark. Having at length concluded all his business, the Frank prepared for his voyage, and on the evening previous to our departure my father took me to his lodgings. Here I saw beautiful dresses and arms lying on the table; but what most attracted my eyes was a large heap of gold, as I had never before seen so much together.

My father embraced me, saying, "Behold, my son, I have provided these clothes for your voyage; those arms are yours, and they are the same your grandfather gave me when I went forth to foreign countries. I know you can wield them, but never use them excepting in self-defence, and then fight bravely. My fortune is not large; but see, have divided it into three parts, of which one is yours, one shall be for my support and wants, but the third shall be sacred property, and devoted to the purpose of saving you in the hour of need." Thus spoke my aged father, and tears trembled in his eyes, perhaps from a certain presentiment, for I never saw him again.

Our voyage was prosperous; we soon reached the land of the Franks, and in six days' journey after landing we came to the great city of Paris. Here my Frankish friend hired a room, and advised me to use proper discretion in laying out my money, which in all was two thousand thalers. I lived for three years in this city, and learned what every skilful physician ought to know; but I should not speak the truth were I to say that I liked the place, for the manners and customs of this people did not suit me. Moreover, I had but few friends, though these were indeed noble young men. The desire of seeing my native country at length became strong; and, having all this time heard nothing of my father, I seized a favourable opportunity to return home. This opportunity was afforded me by an embassy from the land of the Franks to the Sublime Porte. I engaged myself as surgeon in the suite of the ambassador, and was fortunate enough to return to Constantinople. There I found my father's house closed, and the neighbours were astonished when they saw me, and told me that my father had died two months since.

The priest who had instructed me in my youth, brought me the keys of the now desolate house, which I entered alone and forsaken. I found everything as my father had left it, only the money he had promised to bequeath me was not there. I inquired of the priest about it, who, with a bow, told me that my father had died as a holy man, since he had bequeathed all his money to the Church.

The latter circumstance has ever since been inexplicable to me. Yet what could I do? I had no witnesses against the priest, and could not but consider myself fortunate that he had not also claimed as a legacy the house and goods of my father. This was the first calamity that befell me, but from that time misfortunes succeeded each other.

My reputation as a physician spread but slowly, because I was ashamed to play the quack, and I wanted everywhere the recommendation of my father, who would have introduced me to the wealthiest and noblest persons, who now no longer thought of poor Zaleukos. Neither could I find customers for my father's goods, for all had gone elsewhere after his death, and new ones come but slowly.

Once sadly reflecting on my situation, it occurred to me that I had often seen in France men of my native land, who travelled country, exposing their goods in the market-places of the towns; I remembered that they easily found customers, because they came from a foreign country, and that by such traffic one might profit a hundredfold. My resolution was soon taken. I sold my father's house, gave part of the money I received for it to a tried friend to keep for me, and with the rest I purchased such things as are seldom seen in the West-viz. shawls, silks, ointments, and perfumes. Having engaged a berth in a ship, I thus set out on my second voyage to France.

As soon as I had turned my back on the castles of the Dardanelles, it seemed as if fortune would again smile on me. Our passage was short and prosperous. I travelled through large and small towns, and found everywhere ready purchasers of my goods. My friend in Constantinople supplied me constantly with fresh goods, and I daily became more wealthy.

When at length I thought I had saved enough to risk a greater enterprise, I went to Italy. But I must here mention that I derived no small additional profit from the healing art. Whenever I entered a town, I announced, by bills, that a Greek physician had arrived, who had already cured many; and truly my balsams and medicines brought me in many a zechino.

I now reached the city of Florence, in Italy, where I purposed remaining for some time, as I liked it much, and wished to recover from the fatigues of my travels. I hired a shop in the quarter called Santa Croce, and in an inn not far from thence two beautiful rooms which led to a balcony. Having made these arrangements, I had my bills placarded about, announcing myself as a physician and merchant.

I had no sooner opened my shop than I had crowds of customers, and though my prices were rather high, I sold

more than others, because I was civil and obliging to my customers.

When I had thus pleasantly spent four days in Florence, I was one evening about closing my shop, and only had to examine my stock of boxes of ointments, as was my custom, when I found in a small jar a piece of paper which I did not recollect to have put there. On opening it, I discovered that it was an invitation for me to appear that night, at twelve o'clock precisely, on the bridge called Ponte Vecchio. I conjectured a long time who it could possibly be that invited me thither, but, not knowing a soul in Florence, I thought someone wished, perhaps, to take me secretly to some sick person, which was not uncommon, and I therefore determined to go.

However, I took the precaution to buckle on the sword my father had given me. When it was near midnight I set out on my way, and soon arrived at the Ponte Vecchio. I found the bridge forsaken and lonely, and determined to await the person who had appointed to meet me. It was a cold night, the moon shone brightly, and I looked down on the waves of the Arno, glistening in the moonlight. The church clocks now struck the midnight hour; I looked up, and saw before me a tall man, enveloped in a red cloak, a corner of which he had drawn over his face.

At first I was rather terrified at his suddenly appearing behind me, but soon recovered myself, and said, "If you have summoned me hither, say what is your command."

The Red Cloak turned round, and slowly said, "Follow me."

I felt somewhat uneasy at the thought of following the stranger alone; so I stood still, saying, “Nay, sir; please first to tell me whither. Moreover, you might let me have a peep at your face, that I may see whether you intend any good with me.”

But the Red Cloak did not seem to mind my words.

"If you will not follow, Zaleukos, stop where you are," he said, and then went on.

Now my anger was roused, and I cried, "Think you a man like me will submit to be tantalized by any fool, and to wait for nothing in a cold night like this?" In three leaps I overtook him, seized him by the cloak, and cried still louder, while grasping my sword with the other hand.

But the cloak alone remained in my hand, and the stranger vanished round the next corner. My rage gradually subsided, but still I held the cloak, and this I expected would give me a clue to this singular adventure. I wrapped it round me, and walked home.

When I was about a hundred paces from my house, someone passed close by me, and whispered to me in French, "Be on your guard, Count; there is nothing to be done tonight." But before I could look round this somebody had passed, and I only saw his shadow glide along the houses.

That those words were addressed to the owner of the cloak, and not to me, was pretty evident, but this threw no light on the affair. The following morning I considered what I should do. At first I intended to have the cloak cried, as if I had found it on reflection, however, I thought the owner might send another person for it, and that I might still have no clue to the discovery.

While thus considering, I looked at the cloak more narrowly it was of heavy Genoese reddish purple velvet, edged with Astracan fur, and richly embroidered with gold. The sight of this splendid cloak suggested an idea to me, which I resolved to execute. I carried it to my shop and exposed it for sale, but set upon it so high a price that I felt sure I should not find a purchaser. My object in this was to look closely at every person who might ask the price; for I thought I could discover, among a thousand, the figure of the stranger, which, after the loss of the cloak, had shown itself to me distinctly, though but for a moment.

Many came desirous of buying the cloak, the extraordinary beauty of which attracted every eye, but no one had the remotest resemblance to the stranger, and none would pay for it the high price of two hundred zechinos. What struck me most was, that all whom I asked whether they had ever seen such a cloak in Florence before, replied in the negative, assuring me they had never seen such costly and tasteful work.

As evening approached, a young man came who had often been in my shop, and had also during the day made a handsome offer for it. He threw a purse of zechinos on the table, saying, "By heavens, Zaleukos, I must have your cloak, though it will beggar me!" At these words he counted down the gold.

I was greatly embarrassed, having only exposed the cloak for sale in hopes of attracting the looks of its owner, and now comes a young madcap to pay the exorbitant price. But what could I do? I yielded; for the idea was pleasing of being so handsomely recompensed for my nocturnal adventure. The young man put on the cloak and went away; but returned at the door, as he took off a paper which was fastened to it, threw it to me, and said,

“Here, Zaleukos, is something which I think does not belong to the cloak."

I took the paper carelessly, when, behold! it contained these words: "Bring the cloak tonight at the usual hour to the Ponte Vecchio, and four hundred zechinos shall be yours."

I was thunderstruck. Thus, then, I had trifled with my good luck, and utterly missed my aim; but I soon recovered, took the two hundred zechinos, followed him, and said, "Take back your money, my friend, and leave me the cloak. I cannot possibly part with it."

He thought at first I was joking, but when he perceived I was in earnest, he flew into a rage at my demand, called me a fool, and we at length came to blows.

In the scuffle, I was fortunate enough to secure the cloak, and was about to run off with it, when the young man called the police to his assistance, and brought me before the magistrate.

The latter was much surprised at the accusation, and awarded the cloak to my opponent. I now offered the young man twenty, fifty, eighty, nay, a hundred zechinos, if he would let me have it. My gold effected what my entreaties could not. He took my money; I went off triumphant with the cloak, and was obliged to submit to be called mad by all Florence. But I cared little for the opinion of the people, since I knew more than they, viz.

that I still gained by my bargain. I waited the night with impatience.

About the same time as before I went to the Ponte Vecchio, with the cloak under my arm. The figure approached me with the last stroke of the clock, and I could not be mistaken as to its identity.

“Have you the cloak?" was the question.

"I have, sir," I answered, but it cost me a hundred zechinos."

"I know it," he replied; "here are four hundred for it." With these words he stepped to the broad balustrade and counted down the gold, four hundred pieces, which sparkled beautifully in the moonlight; their glitter delighted my heart, which, alas! little imagined that this was its last joy.

I put the money in my pocket, and was going to take a close survey of the kind unknown, but he had on a mask, through which his dark eyes flashed at me frightfully.

"I thank you, sir, for your kindness," said I. "What else do you desire of me? for I must tell you beforehand that it must be nothing underhanded."

"Unnecessary fear," he replied, as he wrapped the cloak round him. "I want your assistance as a physician, not, however, for one living, but for one who is dead."

"How can that be?" I exclaimed, astonished. He beckoned me to follow him, and related as follows: "I came here from foreign lands with my sister, and have lived with her at the house of a friend, where she died suddenly yesterday. Her relatives wish her to be buried to-morrow; and by an ancient custom in our family every member is to buried in the vault of our ancestors, where many who died in foreign countries now repose embalmed. I wish to leave her body to our relations here, but must take to my father her head, at least, that he may see his daughter's face once more."

This custom of cutting off the head of beloved relatives seemed to me somewhat repulsive, but I did not venture to raise any objections, fearing to give offence to the stranger. I therefore told him that I well understood embalming the dead, and begged him to take me to the deceased. At the same time I could not refrain from asking him why all this must be done so mysteriously, and in the night.

To this he answered, that his relations, considering his intention as somewhat cruel, would prevent him if he attempted it during the daytime; but that if the head was once severed they would say little about it; that he, indeed, would have brought me the head himself, had not a natural feeling deterred him from performing the operation.

In the meanwhile we arrived at a large, splendid mansion, which my companion pointed out as the end of our nocturnal walk. Passing the principal gate, we entered the house by a small door, which he carefully fastened after him, and ascended, in the dark, a narrow winding staircase. This led to a faintly-lighted corridor, through which we came to an apartment which was lighted by a lamp suspended from the ceiling. In this apartment was a bed, in which the corpse lay. The stranger averted his face, and seemed anxious to hide his tears. Pointing to the bed, he ordered me to do my business well and expeditiously, and left the apartment.

I took my knives out of the case, which, as a doctor, I always carried, and approached the bed. Only the head of the corpse was visible; it was so beautiful, that, involuntarily, I felt compassion in my inmost heart; the dark hair hung in long tresses over the pale face, and the eyes were closed. I commenced, according to the custom of surgeons when they amputate a limb, by making an incision in the skin. Then, taking my sharpest knife, I cut the throat with one stroke.

Oh! horror! the dead opened her eyes, but closed them again immediately, and with one deep sigh now breathed forth her life. At the same time a stream of hot blood gushed over me from the wound. I was convinced that I only had killed the poor lady. That she was dead now I could no longer doubt, since such a wound was sure to be fatal. I stood for some minutes in fearful anxiety as to what I had done. Had the Red Cloak imposed on me, or had his sister only been apparently dead? The latter seemed to me the more probable, but I dared not tell the brother of the dead that a less speedy cut would perhaps have aroused her without killing her. I was going, therefore, to sever the head entirely, when the dying lady once more groaned, stretched herself in painful convulsions, and then expired.

Overcome by terror, I rushed shuddering from the apartment. It was dark in the corridor without, the lamp was extinguished, no trace of my companion was to be discovered, and I was obliged to grope my way along the wall at hazard in order to reach the winding staircase. I found it at length, and hurried down precipitately.

There was no one visible below, the door was ajar, and when I reached the street I breathed more freely, having felt oppressed with horror in the house. Spurred on by terror, I hastened towards my lodging, and buried myself in the pillows of my couch, to forget the atrocious deed I had perpetrated.

But sleep fled from me, and the morning first summoned me to composure. It seemed to me probable that the man who had seduced me to the fearful act, as it now appeared to me, would not inform against me. I determined to go into my shop to business, and assume, if possible, a cheerful air.

But, alas! a new circumstance, which I observed only now, increased my anxiety: I missed my cap and belt, as well as the knives, and was uncertain whether I had left them in the apartment of the murdered lady, or had lost them in my flight. The former, unfortunately, seemed more probable, and the knives would therefore betray me as the murderer.

I opened my shop at the usual time, and my neighbour came in, as he usually did in the morning, being fond of a chat.

“Well, neighbour," said he, "what do you think of this horrible occurrence which took place last night?"

I pretended not to know anything about it.

"What! do you pretend not to know what is known all over the town? Not to know that the fairest flower in Florence, Bianca, the daughter of the governor, was murdered last night? Ah me! I saw her even yesterday go

in her carriage with her bride- groom, for it was only yesterday she was married."

Every word spoken by my neighbour was a dagger in my heart. How often were these my tortures renewed, for each of my customers repeated the story, one painting it more frightfully than the other, though none could speak all the horrors I had myself witnessed.

About noon an officer from the magistrate entered my shop, and, requesting me to dismiss the customers, and producing the things I missed, he said, "Senore Zaleukos, do you own these things?"

I hesitated a moment whether I had not better disown them altogether, but, seeing through the half-open door my landlord and several acquaintances, who might perhaps witness against me, I determined not to aggravate the affair by telling a falsehood, and so owned the things produced.

The officer desired me to follow him, and led me to a large building, which I soon recognised as a prison. He showed me into an apartment to await further orders. My situation was terrible as I reflected on it in my solitude; the thought of having committed murder, though unintentionally, constantly returned.

Neither could I deny to myself that the glitter of gold had captivated my senses, or I could not so easily have been caught in the snare. Two hours after my arrest, I was led from my room up several staircases into a large hall.

Twelve persons, mostly old men, were sitting at a round table, covered with black cloth. Along the walls stood benches occupied by the nobility of Florence. In the galleries above stood the spectators, densely crowded together. When I stepped to the table, a man, with a gloomy and melancholy expression of countenance, rose: it was the president of the tribunal. Addressing the assembly, he said that, as the father of the murdered, he could not pass judgment in this matter, and therefore ceded his place to the senior of the senators.

The latter was an aged man of at least ninety years. He was bent with age, and his temples were scantily covered with a few white hairs, but his eyes still burned with lustre, and his voice was strong and firm. He began by asking me whether I confessed the murder?

I demanded to be heard, and fearlessly, and in a very audible voice, related what I had done, and what I knew. I observed that the president, during my statement, was alternately flushed and pale, and that, when I concluded, he started up furiously, crying to me,

"What, wretch! do you wish to charge the crime you committed from avarice upon another?"

The senator called him to order for his interruption, as he had voluntarily resigned his right of judgment, remarking, moreover, that it was by no means proved that I committed the crime from avarice, as, by his own deposition, nothing had been stolen from the murdered. Indeed, he went still further, declaring that the president must give an account of the life of his daughter, for that only could enable them to determine whether I had spoken the truth or not. He now dismissed the court for that day, to consult, as he said, the papers of the deceased, which the president would deliver to him.

I was again led back to my prison, where I spent a sorrowful day, still ardently hoping that some connection between the dead lady and the Red Cloak might be discovered.

Full of this hope, I entered the judgment-hall the following day. Several letters lay on the table, and the aged senator asked me whether they were written by me. I looked at them, and found they must be by the same hand as the two slips of paper I had received. This I stated to the senate, but they did not seem to regard it, and answered that I could, and must, have written both, the initial on both letters being evidently a Z, the initial letter of my name.

The letters contained menaces to the deceased, and warnings against the marriage which she was about to contract. The president appeared to have given singular information respecting my person, for they treated me on this day more suspiciously and severely.

In justification of myself, I appealed to my papers which must be found in my lodgings, but they told me that they had searched and found nothing.

Thus, at the closing of the court, all my hopes vanished; and when, on the third day, I was again led into the hall, the sentence was read to me that I was convicted of premeditated murder, and was to die.

To this condition had I come! Forsaken by all that was dear on earth, far distant from my native country, I was, though innocent, to die by the axe in the flower of youth.

As I was sitting in my lonely dungeon on the evening of this terrible day that had decided my fate, all my hopes having fled, and all my thoughts being seriously fixed on death, the door opened, and a man entered, who looked silently at me for a long time.

"Do I thus find you again, Zaleukos?" said he. The faint glimmer of my lamp prevented me from recognising him, but the sound of his voice awakened in me recollections of former days. It was Valetti, one of the few friends I had known in Paris while there pursuing my studies.

He told me that he happened to come to Florence, where his father lived, much respected, that he had heard my history, and had come to see me once more, and to learn from me how I could have committed such a heavy crime. I told him the whole story. He seemed much astonished, and conjured me to tell him, my only friend, everything, that I might not depart this life with a lie on my conscience. I swore to him with a most solemn oath that I had spoken the truth, and that no other guilt oppressed me, but that, being dazzled by the gold, I had not at once recognised the improbability of the stranger's story.

"You did not then know Bianca?" he asked.

I assured him I had never seen her.

Valetti now related to me that a deep secret was connected with the deed, that the president had very much hastened my sentence, and that a report was circulated that I had long known Bianca, and now had murdered her out of revenge for her marrying another.

I observed to him that all this applied well to the Red Cloak, but that I could not prove his participation in the deed.

Valetti embraced me, weeping, and promised to do all in his power to save my life at least. I had little hope, though I knew him to be a wise man, and well conversant in the law, and that he would not fail to do his utmost to save me. For two long days I remained in suspense; at length he came, and exclaimed,

"I bring a consolation, though a sad one. You will live to be free, but must lose one hand."

Deeply affected, I thanked my friend for having saved my life.

He told me the president had been inexorable as to granting a new investigation into the affair, but, that he might not appear unjust, he at length agreed that if they could find a similar case in the annals of Florence, my punishment should be according to that awarded in such a case. He therefore, with his father, had now read day and night in the archives, and had at length found a case similar to mine, the punishment for which was that the perpetrator should have his left hand cut off, his property confiscated, and that he himself should be banished for life.

This was now my sentence, and I was to prepare for the painful moment which awaited me. I will spare you this terrible moment: in the open marketplace I placed my hand on the block, and my own blood gushed over me. When all was over, Valetti took me to his house until my recovery was completed, and then nobly provided me with money for my journey, for all I had earned with so much labour had been taken from me.

From Florence I went to Sicily, and thence by the first ship to Constantinople. Here I hoped to find the sum of money had left with my friend, and begged him to receive me into his house; but what was my astonishment when he inquired why I did not take possession of my own? He informed me that a stranger had purchased a house in my name in the quarter of the Greeks, and had told the neighbours that I was soon coming. I immediately repaired thither with my friend, and was joyfully welcomed by all my old acquaintance.

An aged merchant gave me a letter that had been left by the purchaser of the house for me. Its contents were as follows:- "Zaleukos! Two hands shall be constantly ready to work for you, that you may not feel the loss of the one. The house you now own, with all in it, is yours, and you will receive every year sufficient to make you rank among the wealthy of your countrymen. May you forgive him who is more wretched than yourself!"

I could guess who was the writer of these lines, and the merchant told me, on inquiry, that he took the stranger, who wore a red cloak, for a Frank. I now knew sufficient to convince me that the stranger was not devoid of generous feelings. I found all in my new house arranged admirably, and also a shop with goods more beautiful than I ever possessed.

Ten years have now elapsed, and I have continued my commercial travels more from former habit than necessity, yet I have never again seen the country where I met such a misfortune. Ever since I have annually received a thousand gold pieces; but though I rejoice to know that that unfortunate man is generous, he cannot with his money relieve my soul from its grief, for the awful picture of the murdered Bianca will for ever be present with me.

Featured Artist William Larkin

William Larkin was an English painter active from 1609 until his death in 1619, known for his iconic portraits of members of the court of James I of England, which capture in brilliant detail the opulent layering of textiles, embroidery, lace, and jewellery characteristic of fashion in the Jacobean era. Born in London in the early 1580s, Larkin lived in the parishes of St Sepulchre-without-Newgate, Holborn, and St Anne Blackfriars. He became a freeman of the Worshipful Company of Painter-Stainers on 7 July 1606 under the patronage of Lady Arbella Stuart and Edward Seymour, 1st Earl of Hertford. Larkin's work includes numerous fine examples of oriental carpets and he was particularly skilled in depicting fabrics, drapery, embroidery, and lace. Not much is known about his life, but it is almost certain that he was the son of an innkeeper named William Larkin and lived in the parish of St Sepulchre. His father was a close neighbour of Robert Peake, the portrait painter to Henry, Prince of Wales, and it may have been Peake who introduced Larkin to painting. Larkin was married before 1612 and had several children, including a stillborn son, a son named William, and a daughter named Mary. Until 1952, Larkin was a mostly unknown artist. Architectural historian James Lees Milne found the missing clues and could attribute some paintings to Larkin, bringing him out of obscurity.

Three Young Girls

Left: Lady Diana Cecil c.1614–1618

Below: Portrait of Mary Radclyffe (circa 1610-1613)

He painted in the Elizabethan tradition of fairly static and decorative poses and costumes. A fairly limited range of props and poses were used for these poses and, for example, the x-frame backed chair appears in many portraits of Larkin as well as of his contemporaries, as does the pose with the casually dropped hand holding a handkerchief. The richly decorated costumes, covered with embroidery, ruffs and cuffs, needlelace and cutwork are typical of renaissance style. It was quite common in those days for siblings close in age to wear the same clothes but they could have been wearing bridesmaids dresses as well.

Larkin used a common set of materials for his work consisting of a double ground (water soluble chalk ground, bound with glue or size) overlaid with lead white oil primer. He created an underdrawing in a variety of materials, including a graphite like drawing medium, and he used a grey-green under paintings for painting skin tones. He might have experimented a little with a new zinc 'drier' to speed up drying. His palette was quite common at the time and consisted of chalk, lead white, lead tin yellow, red, yellow and brown earths, vermillion, red lead, two organic red lakes, azurite, smalt (blue), possibly natural ultramarine, verdigris (blueish green), green verditer, and lamp, ivory and charcoal black. He worked on panel as well as canvas. Many of his red lake glazes have faded over time and had to be restored where possible but his reds are now generally a lot more 'vermillion' looking and less rich than originally painted.

Larkin wasn't called the 'Curtain Master' for nothing: he was a true master of depicting fabrics, drapery, embroidery and lace. The painting of the gold thread embroidery is one of Larkin's trademarks. His meticulous depiction of the highlights dotted all over the painting could not be copied by his assistants and experts can still tell whose hand applied the dots. He did not use gilt or metallic leaf but created the effect of metallic shine in mere paint. He had a method of a triple layered application of brown, orange and yellow for gold, and dark grey, light grey and white for silver. Raised dots of paint added to the realistic effect. The embroidered fabrics in his paintings are built up in 7 or 8 layers of paint.

He has taken the Elizabethan tradition of full dress portraiture to its utmost glory, but at the same time he marks the end of this tradition. His faces are much more life-like and subtle than his costumes and certainly a world away from the mask like portraits of the 16th century. They look forward to the arrival of more naturalistic painters from the continent such as Van Dyck. With this new style we gain liveliness but we lose the breath-taking riches of the tudor paintings.

Richard Sackville (1589–1624), 3rd Earl of Dorset (1613)

Ethan Brand

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Bartram the lime-burner, a rough, heavy-looking man, begrimed with charcoal, sat watching his kiln at nightfall, while his little son played at building houses with the scattered fragments of marble, when, on the hill-side below them, they heard a roar of laughter, not mirthful, but slow, and even solemn, like a wind shaking the boughs of the forest. "Father, what is that?" asked the little boy, leaving his play, and pressing betwixt his father's knees. "Oh, some drunken man, I suppose," answered the lime-burner; "some merry fellow from the bar-room in the village, who dared not laugh loud enough within doors lest he should blow the roof of the house off. So here he is, shaking his jolly sides at the foot of Graylock." "But, father," said the child, more sensitive than the obtuse, middle-aged clown, "he does not laugh like a man that is glad. So the noise frightens me!" "Don't be a fool, child!" cried his father, gruffly. "You will never make a man, I do believe; there is too much of your mother in you. I have known the rustling of a leaf startle you. Hark! Here comes the merry fellow now. You shall see that there is no harm in him." Bartram and his little son, while they were talking thus, sat watching the same lime-kiln that had been the scene of Ethan Brand's solitary and meditative life, before he began his search for the Unpardonable Sin. Many years, as we have seen, had now elapsed, since that portentous night when the IDEA was first developed. The kiln, however, on the mountainside, stood unimpaired, and was in nothing changed since he had thrown his dark thoughts into the intense glow of its furnace, and melted them, as it were, into the one thought that took possession of his life. It was a rude, round, tower-like structure about twenty feet high, heavily built of rough stones, and with a hillock of earth heaped about the larger part of its circumference; so that the blocks and fragments of marble might be drawn by cart-loads, and thrown in at the top. There was an opening at the bottom of the tower, like an overmouth, but large enough to admit a man in a stooping posture, and provided with a massive iron door. With the smoke and jets of flame issuing from the chinks and crevices of this door, which seemed to give admittance into the hill-side, it resembled nothing so much as the private entrance to the infernal regions, which the shepherds of the Delectable Mountains were accustomed to show to pilgrims. There are many such lime-kilns in that tract of country, for the purpose of burning the white marble which composes a large part of the substance of the hills. Some of them, built years ago, and long deserted, with weeds growing in the vacant round of the interior, which is open to the sky, and grass and wild-flowers rooting themselves into the chinks of the stones, look already like relics of antiquity, and may yet be overspread with the lichens of centuries to come. Others, where the limeburner still feeds his daily and night-long fire,afford points of interest to the wanderer among the hills, who seats himself on a log of wood or a fragment of marble, to hold a chat with the solitary man. It is a lonesome, and, when the character is inclined to thought, may be an intensely thoughtful occupation; as it proved in the case of Ethan Brand, who had mused to such strange purpose, in days gone by, while the fire in this very kiln was burning. The man who now watched the fire was of a different order, and troubled himself with no thoughts save the very few that were requisite to his business. At frequent intervals, he flung back the clashing weight of the iron door, and, turning his face from the insufferable glare, thrust in huge logs of oak, or stirred the immense brands with a long pole. Within the furnace were seen the curling and riotous flames, and the burning marble, almost molten with the intensity of heat; while without, the reflection of the fire quivered on the dark intricacy of the surrounding forest, and showed in the foreground a bright and ruddy little picture of the hut, the spring beside its door, the athletic and coal-begrimed figure of the lime-burner, and the half-frightened child, shrinking into the protection of his father's shadow. And when, again, the iron door was closed, then reappeared the tender light of the half-full moon, which vainly strove to trace out the indistinct shapes of the neighboring mountains; and, in the upper sky, there was a flitting congregation of clouds, still faintly tinged with the rosy sunset, though thus far down into the valley the sunshine had vanished long and long ago The little boy now crept still closer to his father, as footsteps were heard ascending the hillside, and a human form thrust aside the bushes that clustered beneath the trees. "Halloo! who is it?" cried the lime-burner, vexed at his son's timidity, yet half infected by it. "Come forward, and show yourself, like a man, or I'll fling this chunk of marble at your head!" "You offer me a rough welcome," said a gloomy voice, as the unknown man drew nigh. "Yet I neither claim nor desire a kinder one, even at my own fireside." To obtain a distincter view, Bartram threw open the iron door of the kiln, whence immediately issued a gush of fierce light, that smote full upon the stranger's face and figure. To a careless eye there appeared nothing very remarkable in his aspect, which was that of a man in a coarse brown, country-made suit of clothes, tall and thin, with the staff and heavy shoes of a wayfarer. As he advanced, he fixed his eyes--which were very bright--intently upon the brightness of the furnace, as if he beheld, or expected to behold, some object worthy of note within it. "Good evening, stranger," said the lime-burner; "whence come you, so late in the day?" "I come from my search," answered the wayfarer; "for, at last, it is finished." "Drunk!--or crazy!" muttered Bartram to himself. "I shall have trouble with the fellow. The sooner I drive him away, the better." The little boy, all in a tremble, whispered to his father, and begged him to shut the door of the kiln, so that there might not be so much light; for that there was something in the man's face which he was afraid to look at, yet could not look away from. And, indeed, even the lime-burner's dull and torpid sense began to be impressed by an indescribable something in that thin, rugged, thoughtful visage, with the grizzled hair hanging wildly about it, and those deeply sunken eyes, which gleamed like fires within the entrance of a mysterious cavern. But, as he closed the door, the stranger turned towards him, and spoke in a quiet, familiar way, that made Bartram feel as if he were a sane and sensible man, after all. "Your task draws to an end, I see," said he. "This marble has already been

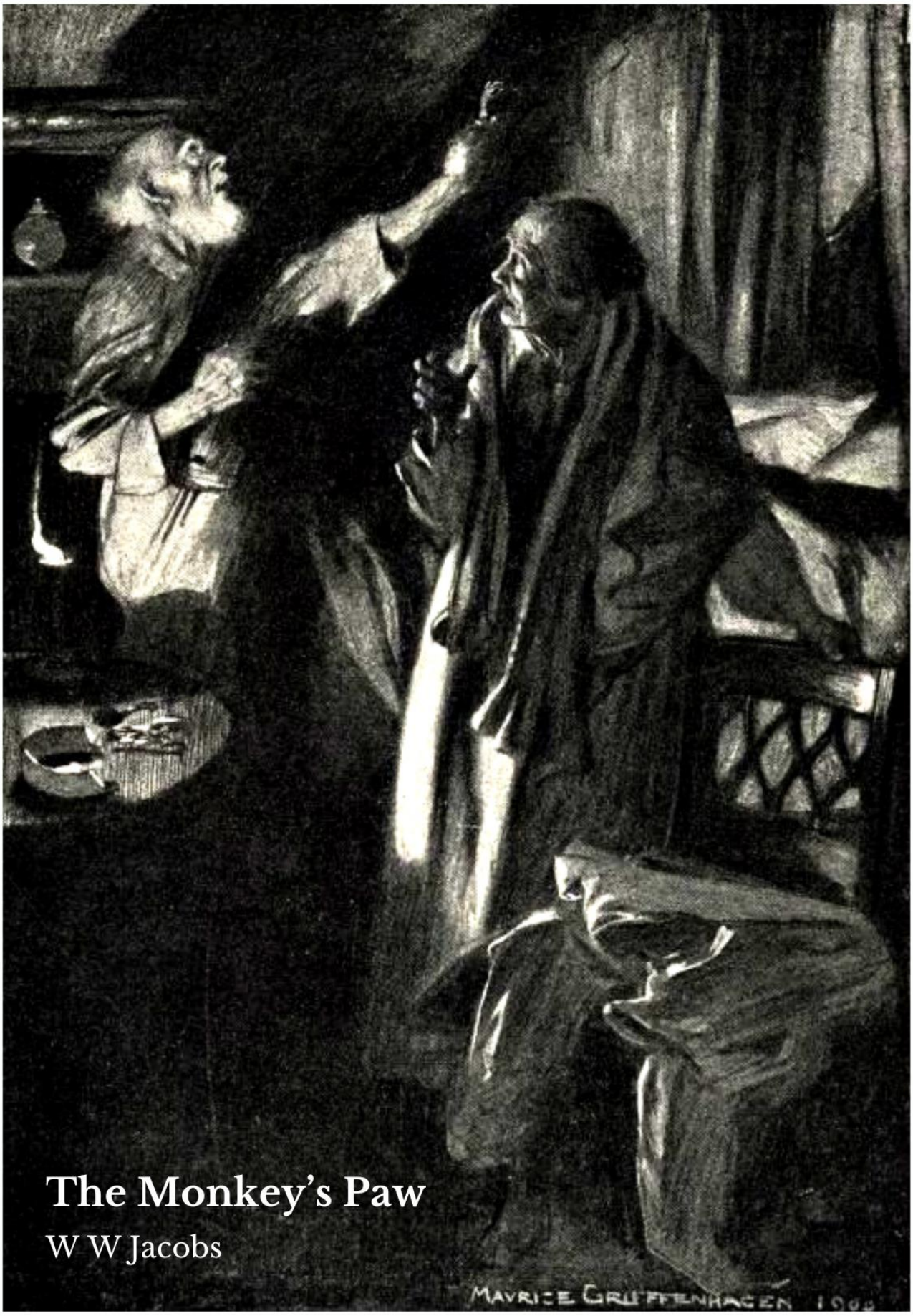
burning three days. A few hours more will convert the stone to lime." "Why, who are you?" exclaimed the lime-burner. "You seem as well acquainted with my business as I am myself." "And well I may be," said the stranger; "for I followed the same craft many a long year, and here, too, on this very spot. But you are a newcomer in these parts. Did you never hear of Ethan Brand?" "The man that went in search of the Unpardonable Sin?" asked Bartram, with a laugh. "The same," answered the stranger. "He has found what he sought, and therefore he comes back again." "What! then you are Ethan Brand himself?" cried the lime-burner, in amazement. "I am a new-comer here, as you say, and they call it eighteen years since you left the foot of Graylock. But, I can tell you, the good folks still talk about Ethan Brand, in the village yonder, and what a strange errand took him away from his lime-kiln. Well, and so you have found the Unpardonable Sin?" "Even so!" said the stranger, calmly. "If the question is a fair one," proceeded Bartram, "where might it be?" Ethan Brand laid his finger on his own heart. "Here!" replied he. And then, without mirth in his countenance, but as if moved by an involuntary recognition of the infinite absurdity of seeking throughout the world for what was the closest of all things to himself, and looking into every heart, save his own, for what was hidden in no other breast, he broke into a laugh of scorn. It was the same slow, heavy laugh, that had almost appalled the lime-burner when it heralded the wayfarer's approach. The solitary mountain-side was made dismal by it. Laughter, when out of place, mistimed, or bursting forth from a disordered state of feeling, may be the most terrible modulation of the human voice. The laughter of one asleep, even if it be a little child,--the madman's laugh,--the wild, screaming laugh of a born idiot,--are sounds that we sometimes tremble to hear, and would always willingly forget. Poets have imagined no utterance of fiends or hobgoblins so fearfully appropriate as a laugh. And even the obtuse lime-burner felt his nerves shaken, as this strange man looked inward at his own heart, and burst into laughter that rolled away into the night, and was indistinctly reverberated among the hills. "Joe," said he to his little son, "scamper down to the tavern in the village, and tell the jolly fellows there that Ethan Brand has come back, and that he has found the Unpardonable Sin!" The boy darted away on his errand, to which Ethan Brand made no objection, nor seemed hardly to notice it. He sat on a log of wood, looking steadfastly at the iron door of the kiln. When the child was out of sight, and his swift and light footsteps ceased to be heard treading first on the fallen leaves and then on the rocky mountain-path, the lime-burner began to regret his departure. He felt that the little fellow's presence had been a barrier between his guest and himself, and that he must now deal, heart to heart, with a man who, on his own confession, had committed the one only crime for which Heaven could afford no mercy. That crime, in its indistinct blackness, seemed to overshadow him, and made his memory riotous with a throng of evil shapes that asserted their kindred with the Master Sin, whatever it might be, which it was within the scope of man's corrupted nature to conceive and cherish. They were all of one family; they went to and fro between his breast and Ethan Brand's, and carried dark greetings from one to the other. Then Bartram remembered the stories which had grown traditionary in reference to this strange man, who had come upon him like a shadow of the night, and was making himself at home in his old place, after so long absence, that the dead people, dead and buried for years, would have had more right to be at home, in any familiar spot, than he. Ethan Brand, it was said, had conversed with Satan himself in the lurid blaze of this very kiln. The legend had been matter of mirth heretofore, but looked grisly now. According to this tale, before Ethan Brand departed on his search, he had been accustomed to evoke a fiend from the hot furnace of the lime-kiln, night after night, in order to confer with him about the Unpardonable Sin; the man and the fiend each laboring to frame the image of some mode of guilt which could neither be atoned for nor forgiven. And, with the first gleam of light upon the mountain-top, the fiend crept in at the iron door, there to abide the intensest element of fire until again summoned forth to share in the dreadful task of extending man's possible guilt beyond the scope of Heaven's else infinite mercy. While the lime-burner was struggling with the horror of these thoughts, Ethan Brand rose from the log, and flung open the door of the kiln. The action was in such accordance with the idea in Bartram's mind, that he almost expected to see the Evil One issue forth, red-hot, from the raging furnace. "Hold! hold!" cried he, with a tremulous attempt to laugh; for he was ashamed of his fears, although they overmastered him. "Don't, for mercy's sake, bring out your Devil now!" "Man!" sternly replied Ethan Brand, "what need have I of the Devil? I have left him behind me, on my track. It is with such half-way sinners as you that he busies himself. Fear not, because I open the door. I do but act by old custom, and am going to trim your fire, like a lime-burner, as I was once." He stirred the vast coals, thrust in more wood, and bent forward to gaze into the hollow prison-house of the fire, regardless of the fierce glow that reddened upon his face. The limeburner sat watching him, and half suspected this strange guest of a purpose, if not to evoke a fiend, at least to plunge into the flames, and thus vanish from the sight of man. Ethan Brand, however, drew quietly back, and closed the door of the kiln. "I have looked," said he, "into many a human heart that was seven times hotter with sinful passions than yonder furnace is with fire. But I found not there what I sought. No, not the Unpardonable Sin!" "What is the Unpardonable Sin?" asked the lime-burner; and then he shrank farther from his companion, trembling lest his question should be answered. "It is a sin that grew within my own breast," replied Ethan Brand, standing erect with a pride that distinguishes all enthusiasts of his stamp. "A sin that grew nowhere else! The sin of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood with man and reverence for God, and sacrificed everything to its own mighty claims! The only sin that deserves a recompense of immortal agony! Freely, were it to do again, would I incur the guilt. Unshrinkingly I accept the retribution!" "The man's head is turned," muttered the lime-burner to himself. "He may

be a sinner like the rest of us,--nothing more likely,--but, I'll be sworn, he is a madman too." Nevertheless, he felt uncomfortable at his situation, alone with Ethan Brand on the wild mountain-side, and was right glad to hear the rough murmur of tongues, and the footsteps of what seemed a pretty numerous party, stumbling over the stones and rustling through the underbrush. Soon appeared the whole lazy regiment that was wont to infest the village tavern, comprehending three or four individuals who had drunk flip beside the bar-room fire through all the winters, and smoked their pipes beneath the stoop through all the summers, since Ethan Brand's departure. Laughing boisterously, and mingling all their voices together in unceremonious talk, they now burst into the moonshine and narrow streaks of firelight that illuminated the open space before the lime-kiln. Bartram set the door ajar again, flooding the spot with light, that the whole company might get a fair view of Ethan Brand, and he of them. There, among other old acquaintances, was a once ubiquitous man, now almost extinct, but whom we were formerly sure to encounter at the hotel of every thriving village throughout the country. It was the stage-agent. The present specimen of the genus was a wilted and smoke-dried man, wrinkled and red-nosed, in a smartly cut, brown, bobtailed coat, with brass buttons, who, for a length of time unknown, had kept his desk and corner in the barroom, and was still puffing what seemed to be the same cigar that he had lighted twenty years before. He had great fame as a dry joker, though, perhaps, less on account of any intrinsic humor than from a certain flavor of brandy-toddy and tobacco-smoke, which impregnated all his ideas and expressions, as well as his person. Another well-remembered, though strangely altered, face was that of Lawyer Giles, as people still called him in courtesy; an elderly ragamuffin, in his soiled shirtsleeves and tow-cloth trousers. This poor fellow had been an attorney, in what he called his better days, a sharp practitioner, and in great vogue among the village litigants; but flip, and sling, and toddy, and cocktails, imbibed at all hours, morning, noon, and night, had caused him to slide from intellectual to various kinds and degrees of bodily labor, till at last, to adopt his own phrase, he slid into a soap-vat. In other words, Giles was now a soap-boiler, in a small way. He had come to be but the fragment of a human being, a part of one foot having been chopped off by an axe, and an entire hand torn away by the devilish grip of a steam-engine. Yet, though the corporeal hand was gone, a spiritual member remained; for, stretching forth the stump, Giles steadfastly averred that he felt an invisible thumb and fingers with as vivid a sensation as before the real ones were amputated. A maimed and miserable wretch he was; but one, nevertheless, whom the world could not trample on, and had no right to scorn, either in this or any previous stage of his misfortunes, since he had still kept up the courage and spirit of a man, asked nothing in charity, and with his one hand--and that the left one-- fought a stern battle against want and hostile circumstances. Among the throng, too, came another personage, who, with certain points of similarity to Lawyer Giles, had many more of difference. It was the village doctor; a man of some fifty years, whom, at an earlier period of his life, we introduced as paying a professional visit to Ethan Brand during the latter's supposed insanity. He was now a purple-visaged, rude, and brutal, yet half-gentlemanly figure, with something wild, ruined, and desperate in his talk, and in all the details of his gesture and manners. Brandy possessed this man like an evil spirit, and made him as surly and savage as a wild beast, and as miserable as a lost soul; but there was supposed to be in him such wonderful skill, such native gifts of healing, beyond any which medical science could impart, that society caught hold of him, and would not let him sink out of its reach. So, swaying to and fro upon his horse, and grumbling thick accents at the bedside, he visited all the sick-chambers for miles about among the mountain towns, and sometimes raised a dying man, as it were, by miracle, or quite as often, no doubt, sent his patient to a grave that was dug many a year too soon. The doctor had an everlasting pipe in his mouth, and, as somebody said, in allusion to his habit of swearing, it was always alight with hell-fire. These three worthies pressed forward, and greeted Ethan Brand each after his own fashion, earnestly inviting him to partake of the contents of a certain black bottle, in which, as they averred, he would find something far better worth seeking than the Unpardonable Sin. No mind, which has wrought itself by intense and solitary meditation into a high state of enthusiasm, can endure the kind of contact with low and vulgar modes of thought and feeling to which Ethan Brand was now subjected. It made him doubt--and, strange to say, it was a painful doubt--whether he had indeed found the Unpardonable Sin, and found it within himself. The whole question on which he had exhausted life, and more than life, looked like a delusion. "Leave me," he said bitterly, "ye brute beasts, that have made yourselves so, shrivelling up your souls with fiery liquors! I have done with you. Years and years ago, I groped into your hearts and found nothing there for my purpose. Get ye gone!" "Why, you uncivil scoundrel," cried the fierce doctor, "is that the way you respond to the kindness of your best friends? Then let me tell you the truth. You have no more found the Unpardonable Sin than yonder boy Joe has. You are but a crazy fellow,--I told you so twenty years ago,-neither better nor worse than a crazy fellow, and the fit companion of old Humphrey, here!" He pointed to an old man, shabbily dressed, with long white hair, thin visage, and unsteady eyes. For some years past this aged person had been wandering about among the hills, inquiring of all travellers whom he met for his daughter. The girl, it seemed, had gone off with a company of circus-performers, and occasionally tidings of her came to the village, and fine stories were told of her glittering appearance as she rode on horseback in the ring, or performed marvellous feats on the tight-rope. The white-haired father now approached Ethan Brand, and gazed unsteadily into his face. "They tell me you have been all over the earth," said he, wringing his hands with earnestness. "You must have seen my daughter, for she makes a grand figure in the world, and everybody goes to see her. Did she send any word to her old father,

or say when she was coming back?" Ethan Brand's eye quailed beneath the old man's. That daughter, from whom he so earnestly desired a word of greeting, was the Esther of our tale, the very girl whom, with such cold and remorseless purpose, Ethan Brand had made the subject of a psychological experiment, and wasted, absorbed, and perhaps annihilated her soul, in the process. "Yes," he murmured, turning away from the hoary wanderer, "it is no delusion. There is an Unpardonable Sin!" While these things were passing, a merry scene was going forward in the area of cheerful light, beside the spring and before the door of the hut. A number of the youth of the village, young men and girls, had hurried up the hill-side, impelled by curiosity to see Ethan Brand, the hero of so many a legend familiar to their childhood. Finding nothing, however, very remarkable in his aspect,--nothing but a sunburnt wayfarer, in plain garb and dusty shoes, who sat looking into the fire as if he fancied pictures among the coals,--these young people speedily grew tired of observing him. As it happened, there was other amusement at hand. An old German Jew travelling with a diorama on his back, was passing down the mountainroad towards the village just as the party turned aside from it, and, in hopes of eking out the profits of the day, the showman had kept them company to the lime-kiln. "Come, old Dutchman," cried one of the young men, "let us see your pictures, if you can swear they are worth looking at!" "Oh yes, Captain," answered the Jew,--whether as a matter of courtesy or craft, he styled everybody Captain,--"I shall show you, indeed, some very superb pictures!" So, placing his box in a proper position, he invited the young men and girls to look through the glass orifices of the machine, and proceeded to exhibit a series of the most outrageous scratchings and daubings, as specimens of the fine arts, that ever an itinerant showman had the face to impose upon his circle of spectators. The pictures were worn out, moreover, tattered, full of cracks and wrinkles, dingy with tobacco-smoke, and otherwise in a most pitiable condition. Some purported to be cities, public edifices, and ruined castles in Europe; others represented Napoleon's battles and Nelson's sea-fights; and in the midst of these would be seen a gigantic, brown, hairy hand,--which might have been mistaken for the Hand of Destiny, though, in truth, it was only the showman's,--pointing its forefinger to various scenes of the conflict, while its owner gave historical illustrations. When, with much merriment at its abominable deficiency of merit, the exhibition was concluded, the German bade little Joe put his head into the box. Viewed through the magnifying-glasses, the boy's round, rosy visage assumed the strangest imaginable aspect of an immense Titanic child, the mouth grinning broadly, and the eyes and every other feature overflowing with fun at the joke. Suddenly, however, that merry face turned pale, and its expression changed to horror, for this easily impressed and excitable child had become sensible that the eye of Ethan Brand was fixed upon him through the glass. "You make the little man to be afraid, Captain," said the German Jew, turning up the dark and strong outline of his visage from his stooping posture. "But look again, and, by chance, I shall cause you to see somewhat that is very fine, upon my word!" Ethan Brand gazed into the box for an instant, and then starting back, looked fixedly at the German. What had he seen? Nothing, apparently; for a curious youth, who had peeped in almost at the same moment, beheld only a vacant space of canvas. "I remember you now," muttered Ethan Brand to the showman. "Ah, Captain," whispered the Jew of Nuremberg, with a dark smile, "I find it to be a heavy matter in my show-box,--this Unpardonable Sin! By my faith, Captain, it has wearied my shoulders, this long day, to carry it over the mountain." "Peace," answered Ethan Brand, sternly, "or get thee into the furnace yonder!" The Jew's exhibition had scarcely concluded, when a great, elderly dog --who seemed to be his own master, as no person in the company laid claim to him--saw fit to render himself the object of public notice. Hitherto, he had shown himself a very quiet, well-disposed old dog, going round from one to another, and, by way of being sociable, offering his rough head to be patted by any kindly hand that would take so much trouble. But now, all of a sudden, this grave and venerable quadruped, of his own mere motion, and without the slightest suggestion from anybody else, began to run round after his tail, which, to heighten the absurdity of the proceeding, was a great deal shorter than it should have been. Never was seen such headlong eagerness in pursuit of an object that could not possibly be attained; never was heard such a tremendous outbreak of growling, snarling, barking, and snapping,--as if one end of the ridiculous brute's body were at deadly and most unforgivable enmity with the other. Faster and faster, round about went the cur; and faster and still faster fled the unapproachable brevity of his tail; and louder and fiercer grew his yells of rage and animosity; until, utterly exhausted, and as far from the goal as ever, the foolish old dog ceased his performance as suddenly as he had begun it. The next moment he was as mild, quiet, sensible, and respectable in his deportment, as when he first scraped acquaintance with the company. As may be supposed, the exhibition was greeted with universal laughter, clapping of hands, and shouts of encore, to which the canine performer responded by wagging all that there was to wag of his tail, but appeared totally unable to repeat his very successful effort to amuse the spectators. Meanwhile, Ethan Brand had resumed his seat upon the log, and moved, as it might be, by a perception of some remote analogy between his own case and that of this self-pursuing cur, he broke into the awful laugh, which, more than any other token, expressed the condition of his inward being. From that moment, the merriment of the party was at an end; they stood aghast, dreading lest the inauspicious sound should be reverberated around the horizon, and that mountain would thunder it to mountain, and so the horror be prolonged upon their ears. Then, whispering one to another that it was late,--that the moon was almost down,-that the August night was growing chill,--they hurried homewards, leaving the lime-burner and little Joe to deal as they might with their unwelcome guest. Save for these three human beings, the open space

on the hill-side was a solitude, set in a vast gloom of forest. Beyond that darksome verge, the firelight glimmered on the stately trunks and almost black foliage of pines, intermixed with the lighter verdure of sapling oaks, maples, and poplars, while here and there lay the gigantic corpses of dead trees, decaying on the leaf-strewn soil. And it seemed to little Joe --a timorous and imaginative child--that the silent forest was holding its breath until some fearful thing should happen. Ethan Brand thrust more wood into the fire, and closed the door of the kiln; then looking over his shoulder at the lime-burner and his son, he bade, rather than advised, them to retire to rest. "For myself, I cannot sleep," said he. "I have matters that it concerns me to meditate upon. I will watch the fire, as I used to do in the old time." "And call the Devil out of the furnace to keep you company, I suppose," muttered Bartram, who had been making intimate acquaintance with the black bottle above mentioned. "But watch, if you like, and call as many devils as you like! For my part, I shall be all the better for a snooze. Come, Joe!" As the boy followed his father into the hut, he looked back at the wayfarer, and the tears came into his eyes, for his tender spirit had an intuition of the bleak and terrible loneliness in which this man had enveloped himself. When they had gone, Ethan Brand sat listening to the crackling of the kindled wood, and looking at the little spirts of fire that issued through the chinks of the door. These trifles, however, once so familiar, had but the slightest hold of his attention, while deep within his mind he was reviewing the gradual but marvellous change that had been wrought upon him by the search to which he had devoted himself. He remembered how the night dew had fallen upon him,--how the dark forest had whispered to him,--how the stars had gleamed upon him,--a simple and loving man, watching his fire in the years gone by, and ever musing as it burned. He remembered with what tenderness, with what love and sympathy for mankind and what pity for human guilt and woe, he had first begun to contemplate those ideas which afterwards became the inspiration of his life; with what reverence he had then looked into the heart of man, viewing it as a temple originally divine, and, however desecrated, still to be held sacred by a brother; with what awful fear he had deprecated the success of his pursuit, and prayed that the Unpardonable Sin might never be revealed to him. Then ensued that vast intellectual development, which, in its progress, disturbed the counterpoise between his mind and heart. The Idea that possessed his life had operated as a means of education; it had gone on cultivating his powers to the highest point of which they were susceptible; it had raised him from the level of an unlettered laborer to stand on a starlit eminence, whither the philosophers of the earth, laden with the lore of universities, might vainly strive to clamber after him. So much for the intellect! But where was the heart? That, indeed, had withered,--had contracted,--had hardened,--had perished! It had ceased to partake of the universal throb. He had lost his hold of the magnetic chain of humanity. He was no longer a brother-man, opening the chambers or the dungeons of our common nature by the key of holy sympathy, which gave him a right to share in all its secrets; he was now a cold observer, looking on mankind as the subject of his experiment, and, at length, converting man and woman to be his puppets, and pulling the wires that moved them to such degrees of crime as were demanded for his study. Thus Ethan Brand became a fiend. He began to be so from the moment that his moral nature had ceased to keep the pace of improvement with his intellect. And now, as his highest effort and inevitable development,--as the bright and gorgeous flower, and rich, delicious fruit of his life's labor,--he had produced the Unpardonable Sin! "What more have I to seek? what more to achieve?" said Ethan Brand to himself. "My task is done, and well done!" Starting from the log with a certain alacrity in his gait and ascending the hillock of earth that was raised against the stone circumference of the lime-kiln, he thus reached the top of the structure. It was a space of perhaps ten feet across, from edge to edge, presenting a view of the upper surface of the immense mass of broken marble with which the kiln was heaped. All these innumerable blocks and fragments of marble were redhot and vividly on fire, sending up great spouts of blue flame, which quivered aloft and danced madly, as within a magic circle, and sank and rose again, with continual and multitudinous activity. As the lonely man bent forward over this terrible body of fire, the blasting heat smote up against his person with a breath that, it might be supposed, would have scorched and shrivelled him up in a moment. Ethan Brand stood erect, and raised his arms on high. The blue flames played upon his face, and imparted the wild and ghastly light which alone could have suited its expression; it was that of a fiend on the verge of plunging into his gulf of intensest torment. "O Mother Earth," cried he, "who art no more my Mother, and into whose bosom this frame shall never be resolved! O mankind, whose brotherhood I have cast off, and trampled thy great heart beneath my feet! O stars of heaven, that shone on me of old, as if to light me onward and upward!--farewell all, and forever. Come, deadly element of Fire,-henceforth my familiar friend! Embrace me, as I do thee! " That night the sound of a fearful peal of laughter rolled heavily through the sleep of the lime-burner and his little son; dim shapes of horror and anguish haunted their dreams, and seemed still present in the rude hovel, when they opened their eyes to the daylight. "Up, boy, up!" cried the lime-burner, staring about him. "Thank Heaven, the night is gone, at last; and rather than pass such another, I would watch my lime-kiln, wide awake, for a twelvemonth. This Ethan Brand, with his humbug of an Unpardonable Sin, has done me no such mighty favor, in taking my place!" He issued from the hut, followed by little Joe, who kept fast hold of his father's hand. The early sunshine was already pouring its gold upon the mountain-tops, and though the valleys were still in shadow, they smiled cheerfully in the promise of the bright day that was hastening onward. The village, completely shut in by hills, which swelled away gently about it, looked as if it had rested peacefully in the hollow of the great hand of Providence. Every dwelling was distinctly visible; the little spires of the two

churches pointed upwards, and caught a fore-glimmering of brightness from the sun-gilt skies upon their gilded weather-cocks. The tavern was astir, and the figure of the old, smoke-dried stage-agent, cigar in mouth, was seen beneath the stoop. Old Graylock was glorified with a golden cloud upon his head. Scattered likewise over the breasts of the surrounding mountains, there were heaps of hoary mist, in fantastic shapes, some of them far down into the valley, others high up towards the summits, and still others, of the same family of mist or cloud, hovering in the gold radiance of the upper atmosphere. Stepping from one to another of the clouds that rested on the hills, and thence to the loftier brotherhood that sailed in air, it seemed almost as if a mortal man might thus ascend into the heavenly regions. Earth was so mingled with sky that it was a day-dream to look at it. To supply that charm of the familiar and homely, which Nature so readily adopts into a scene like this, the stage-coach was rattling down the mountain-road, and the driver sounded his horn, while Echo caught up the notes, and intertwined them into a rich and varied and elaborate harmony, of which the original performer could lay claim to little share. The great hills played a concert among themselves, each contributing a strain of airy sweetness. Little Joe's face brightened at once. "Dear father," cried he, skipping cheerily to and fro, "that strange man is gone, and the sky and the mountains all seem glad of it!" "Yes," growled the lime-burner, with an oath, "but he has let the fire go down, and no thanks to him if five hundred bushels of lime are not spoiled. If I catch the fellow hereabouts again, I shall feel like tossing him into the furnace!" With his long pole in his hand, he ascended to the top of the kiln. After a moment's pause, he called to his son. "Come up here, Joe!" said he. So little Joe ran up the hillock, and stood by his father's side. The marble was all burnt into perfect, snow-white lime. But on its surface, in the midst of the circle,--snow-white too, and thoroughly converted into lime,--lay a human skeleton, in the attitude of a person who, after long toil, lies down to long repose. Within the ribs--strange to say--was the shape of a human heart. "Was the fellow's heart made of marble?" cried Bartram, in some perplexity at this phenomenon. "At any rate, it is burnt into what looks like special good lime; and, taking all the bones together, my kiln is half a bushel the richer for him." So saying, the rude lime-burner lifted his pole, and, letting it fall upon the skeleton, the relics of Ethan Brand were crumbled into fragments.



The Monkey's Paw

W W Jacobs

Without, the night was cold and wet, but in the small parlour of Laburnam Villa the blinds were drawn and the fire burned brightly. Father and son were at chess, the former, who possessed ideas about the game involving radical changes, putting his king into such sharp and unnecessary perils that it even provoked comment from the white-haired old lady knitting placidly by the fire.

"Hark at the wind," said Mr. White, who, having seen a fatal mistake after it was too late, was amiably desirous of preventing his son from seeing it.

"I'm listening," said the latter, grimly surveying the board as he stretched out his hand. "Check."

"I should hardly think that he'd come to-night," said his father, with his hand poised over the board.

"Mate," replied the son.

"That's the worst of living so far out," bawled Mr. White, with sudden and unlooked-for violence; "of all the beastly, slushy, out-of-the-way places to live in, this is the worst. Pathway's a bog, and the road's a torrent. I don't know what people are thinking about. I suppose because only two houses in the road are let, they think it doesn't matter."

"Never mind, dear," said his wife, soothingly; "perhaps you'll win the next one."

Mr. White looked up sharply, just in time to intercept a knowing glance between mother and son. The words died away on his lips, and he hid a guilty grin in his thin grey beard.

"There he is," said Herbert White, as the gate banged to loudly and heavy footsteps came toward the door.

The old man rose with hospitable haste, and opening the door, was heard condoling with the new arrival. The new arrival also condoled with himself, so that Mrs. White said, "Tut, tut!" and coughed gently as her husband entered the room, followed by a tall, burly man, beady of eye and rubicund of visage.

"Sergeant-Major Morris," he said, introducing him.

The sergeant-major shook hands, and taking the proffered seat by the fire, watched contentedly while his host got out whiskey and tumblers and stood a small copper kettle on the fire.

At the third glass his eyes got brighter, and he began to talk, the little family circle regarding with eager interest this visitor from distant parts, as he squared his broad shoulders in the chair and spoke of wild scenes and doughty deeds; of wars and plagues and strange peoples.

"Twenty-one years of it," said Mr. White, nodding at his wife and son. "When he went away he was a slip of a youth in the warehouse. Now look at him."

"He don't look to have taken much harm," said Mrs. White, politely.

"I'd like to go to India myself," said the old man, "just to look round a bit, you know."

"Better where you are," said the sergeant-major, shaking his head. He put down the empty glass, and sighing softly, shook it again.

"I should like to see those old temples and fakirs and jugglers," said the old man. "What was that you started telling me the other day about a monkey's paw or something, Morris?"

"Nothing," said the soldier, hastily. "Leastways nothing worth hearing."

"Monkey's paw?" said Mrs. White, curiously.

"Well, it's just a bit of what you might call magic, perhaps," said the sergeant-major, offhandedly.

His three listeners leaned forward eagerly. The visitor absent-mindedly put his empty glass to his lips and then set it down again. His host filled it for him.

"To look at," said the sergeant-major, fumbling in his pocket, "it's just an ordinary little paw, dried to a mummy."

He took something out of his pocket and proffered it. Mrs. White drew back with a grimace, but her son, taking it, examined it curiously.

"And what is there special about it?" inquired Mr. White as he took it from his son, and having examined it, placed it upon the table.

"It had a spell put on it by an old fakir," said the sergeant-major, "a very holy man. He wanted to show that fate ruled people's lives, and that those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow. He put a spell on it so that three separate men could each have three wishes from it."

His manner was so impressive that his hearers were conscious that their light laughter jarred somewhat.

"Well, why don't you have three, sir?" said Herbert White, cleverly.

The soldier regarded him in the way that middle age is wont to regard presumptuous youth. "I have," he said, quietly, and his blotchy face whitened.

"And did you really have the three wishes granted?" asked Mrs. White.

"I did," said the sergeant-major, and his glass tapped against his strong teeth.

"And has anybody else wished?" persisted the old lady.

"The first man had his three wishes. Yes," was the reply; "I don't know what the first two were, but the third was for death. That's how I got the paw."

His tones were so grave that a hush fell upon the group.

"If you've had your three wishes, it's no good to you now, then, Morris," said the old man at last. "What do you keep it for?"

The soldier shook his head. "Fancy, I suppose," he said, slowly. "I did have some idea of selling it, but I don't think I will. It has caused enough mischief already. Besides, people won't buy. They think it's a fairy tale; some of them, and those who do think anything of it want to try it first and pay me afterward."

"If you could have another three wishes," said the old man, eyeing him keenly, "would you have them?"

"I don't know," said the other. "I don't know."

He took the paw, and dangling it between his forefinger and thumb, suddenly threw it upon the fire. White, with a slight cry, stooped down and snatched it off.

"Better let it burn," said the soldier, solemnly.

"If you don't want it, Morris," said the other, "give it to me."

"I won't," said his friend, doggedly. "I threw it on the fire. If you keep it, don't blame me for what happens. Pitch it on the fire again like a sensible man."

The other shook his head and examined his new possession closely. "How do you do it?" he inquired.

"Hold it up in your right hand and wish aloud," said the sergeant-major, "but I warn you of the consequences."

"Sounds like the *Arabian Nights*," said Mrs. White, as she rose and began to set the supper. "Don't you think you might wish for four pairs of hands for me?"

Her husband drew the talisman from pocket, and then all three burst into laughter as the sergeant-major, with a look of alarm on his face, caught him by the arm.

"If you must wish," he said, gruffly, "wish for something sensible."

Mr. White dropped it back in his pocket, and placing chairs, motioned his friend to the table. In the business of supper the talisman was partly forgotten, and afterward the three sat listening in an enthralled fashion to a second instalment of the soldier's adventures in India.

"If the tale about the monkey's paw is not more truthful than those he has been telling us," said Herbert, as the door closed behind their guest, just in time for him to catch the last train, "we sha'nt make much out of it."

"Did you give him anything for it, father?" inquired Mrs. White, regarding her husband closely.

"A trifle," said he, colouring slightly. "He didn't want it, but I made him take it. And he pressed me again to throw it away."

"Likely," said Herbert, with pretended horror. "Why, we're going to be rich, and famous and happy. Wish to be an emperor, father, to begin with; then you can't be henpecked."

He darted round the table, pursued by the maligned Mrs. White armed with an antimacassar.

Mr. White took the paw from his pocket and eyed it dubiously. "I don't know what to wish for, and that's a fact," he said, slowly. "It seems to me I've got all I want."

"If you only cleared the house, you'd be quite happy, wouldn't you?" said Herbert, with his hand on his shoulder. "Well, wish for two hundred pounds, then; that 'll just do it."

His father, smiling shamefacedly at his own credulity, held up the talisman, as his son, with a solemn face, somewhat marred by a wink at his mother, sat down at the piano and struck a few impressive chords.

"I wish for two hundred pounds," said the old man distinctly.

A fine crash from the piano greeted the words, interrupted by a shuddering cry from the old man. His wife and son ran toward him.

"It moved," he cried, with a glance of disgust at the object as it lay on the floor.

"As I wished, it twisted in my hand like a snake."

"Well, I don't see the money," said his son as he picked it up and placed it on the table, "and I bet I never shall."

"It must have been your fancy, father," said his wife, regarding him anxiously.

He shook his head. "Never mind, though; there's no harm done, but it gave me a shock all the same."

They sat down by the fire again while the two men finished their pipes. Outside, the wind was higher than ever, and the old man started nervously at the sound of a door banging upstairs. A silence unusual and depressing settled upon all three, which lasted until the old couple rose to retire for the night.

"I expect you'll find the cash tied up in a big bag in the middle of your bed," said Herbert, as he bade them good-night, "and something horrible squatting up on top of the wardrobe watching you as you pocket your ill-gotten gains."

He sat alone in the darkness, gazing at the dying fire, and seeing faces in it. The last face was so horrible and so simian that he gazed at it in amazement. It got so vivid that, with a little uneasy laugh, he felt on the table for a glass containing a little water to throw over it. His hand grasped the monkey's paw, and with a little shiver he wiped his hand on his coat and went up to bed.

In the brightness of the wintry sun next morning as it streamed over the breakfast table he laughed at his fears. There was an air of prosaic wholesomeness about the room which it had lacked on the previous night, and the dirty, shrivelled little paw was pitched on the sideboard with a carelessness which betokened no great belief in its virtues.

"I suppose all old soldiers are the same," said Mrs. White. "The idea of our listening to such nonsense! How could wishes be granted in these days? And if they could, how could two hundred pounds hurt you, father?"

"Might drop on his head from the sky," said the frivolous Herbert.

"Morris said the things happened so naturally," said his father, "that you might if you so wished attribute it to coincidence."

"Well, don't break into the money before I come back," said Herbert as he rose from the table. "I'm afraid it'll turn you into a mean, avaricious man, and we shall have to disown you."

His mother laughed, and following him to the door, watched him down the road; and returning to the breakfast table, was very happy at the expense of her husband's credulity. All of which did not prevent her from scurrying to the door at the postman's knock, nor prevent her from referring somewhat shortly to retired sergeant-majors of bibulous habits when she found that the post brought a tailor's bill.

"Herbert will have some more of his funny remarks, I expect, when he comes home," she said, as they sat at dinner.

"I dare say," said Mr. White, pouring himself out some beer; "but for all that, the thing moved in my hand; that I'll swear to."

"You thought it did," said the old lady soothingly.

"I say it did," replied the other. "There was no thought about it; I had just—What's the matter?"

His wife made no reply. She was watching the mysterious movements of a man outside, who, peering

in an undecided fashion at the house, appeared to be trying to make up his mind to enter. In mental connection with the two hundred pounds, she noticed that the stranger was well dressed, and wore a silk hat of glossy newness. Three times he paused at the gate, and then walked on again. The fourth time he stood with his hand upon it, and then with sudden resolution flung it open and walked up the path. Mrs. White at the same moment placed her hands behind her, and hurriedly unfastening the strings of her apron, put that useful article of apparel beneath the cushion of her chair.

She brought the stranger, who seemed ill at ease, into the room. He gazed at her furtively, and listened in a preoccupied fashion as the old lady apologized for the appearance of the room, and her husband's coat, a garment which he usually reserved for the garden. She then waited as patiently as her sex would permit, for him to broach his business, but he was at first strangely silent.

"I—was asked to call," he said at last, and stooped and picked a piece of cotton from his trousers. "I come from 'Maw and Meggins.'"

The old lady started. "Is anything the matter?" she asked, breathlessly. "Has anything happened to Herbert? What is it? What is it?"

Her husband interposed. "There, there, mother," he said, hastily. "Sit down, and don't jump to conclusions. You've not brought bad news, I'm sure, sir;" and he eyed the other wistfully.

"I'm sorry—" began the visitor.

"Is he hurt?" demanded the mother, wildly.

The visitor bowed in assent. "Badly hurt," he said, quietly, "but he is not in any pain."

"Oh, thank God!" said the old woman, clasping her hands. "Thank God for that! Thank—"

She broke off suddenly as the sinister meaning of the assurance dawned upon her and she saw the awful confirmation of her fears in the other's averted face. She caught her breath, and turning to her slower-witted husband, laid her trembling old hand upon his. There was a long silence.

"He was caught in the machinery," said the visitor at length in a low voice.

"Caught in the machinery," repeated Mr. White, in a dazed fashion, "yes."

He sat staring blankly out at the window, and taking his wife's hand between his own, pressed it as he had been wont to do in their old courting-days nearly forty years before.

"He was the only one left to us," he said, turning gently to the visitor. "It is hard."

The other coughed, and rising, walked slowly to the window. "The firm wished me to convey their sincere sympathy with you in your great loss," he said, without looking round. "I beg that you will understand I am only their servant and merely obeying orders."

There was no reply; the old woman's face was white, her eyes staring, and her breath inaudible; on the husband's face was a look such as his friend the sergeant might have carried into his first action.

"I was to say that 'Maw and Meggins' disclaim all responsibility," continued the other. "They admit no liability at all, but in consideration of your son's services, they wish to present you with a certain sum as compensation."

Mr. White dropped his wife's hand, and rising to his feet, gazed with a look of horror at his visitor. His dry lips shaped the words, "How much?"

"Two hundred pounds," was the answer.

Unconscious of his wife's shriek, the old man smiled faintly, put out his hands like a sightless man, and dropped, a senseless heap, to the floor.

In the huge new cemetery, some two miles distant, the old people buried their dead, and came back to a house steeped in shadow and silence. It was all over so quickly that at first they could hardly realize it, and remained in a state of expectation as though of something else to happen —something else which was to lighten this load, too heavy for old hearts to bear.

But the days passed, and expectation gave place to resignation—the hopeless resignation of the old, sometimes miscalled, apathy. Sometimes they hardly exchanged a word, for now they had nothing to talk about, and their days were long to weariness.

It was about a week after that the old man, waking suddenly in the night, stretched out his hand and found himself alone. The room was in darkness, and the sound of subdued weeping came from the window. He raised himself in bed and listened.

"Come back," he said, tenderly. "You will be cold."

"It is colder for my son," said the old woman, and wept afresh.

The sound of her sobs died away on his ears. The bed was warm, and his eyes heavy with sleep. He dozed fitfully, and then slept until a sudden wild cry from his wife awoke him with a start.

"*The paw!*" she cried wildly. "The monkey's paw!"

He started up in alarm. "Where? Where is it? What's the matter?"

She came stumbling across the room toward him. "I want it," she said, quietly. "You've not destroyed it?"

"It's in the parlour, on the bracket," he replied, marvelling. "Why?"

She cried and laughed together, and bending over, kissed his cheek.

"I only just thought of it," she said, hysterically. "Why didn't I think of it before? Why didn't *you* think of it?"

"Think of what?" he questioned.

"The other two wishes," she replied, rapidly. "We've only had one."

"Was not that enough?" he demanded, fiercely.

"No," she cried, triumphantly; "we'll have one more. Go down and get it quickly, and wish our boy alive again."

The man sat up in bed and flung the bedclothes from his quaking limbs. "Good God, you are mad!" he cried, aghast.

"Get it," she panted; "get it quickly, and wish—Oh, my boy, my boy!"

Her husband struck a match and lit the candle. "Get back to bed," he said, unsteadily. "You don't know what you are saying."

"We had the first wish granted," said the old woman, feverishly; "why not the second?"

"A coincidence," stammered the old man.

"Go and get it and wish," cried his wife, quivering with excitement.

The old man turned and regarded her, and his voice shook. "He has been dead ten days, and besides he—I would not tell you else, but—I could only recognize him by his clothing. If he was too terrible for you to see then, how now?"

"Bring him back," cried the old woman, and dragged him toward the door. "Do you think I fear the child I have nursed?"

He went down in the darkness, and felt his way to the parlour, and then to the mantelpiece. The talisman was in its place, and a horrible fear that the unspoken wish might bring his mutilated son before him ere he could escape from the room seized upon him, and he caught his breath as he found that he had lost the direction of the door. His brow cold with sweat, he felt his way round the table, and groped along the wall until he found himself in the small passage with the unwholesome thing in his hand.

Even his wife's face seemed changed as he entered the room. It was white and expectant, and to his fears seemed to have an unnatural look upon it. He was afraid of her.

"*Wish!*" she cried, in a strong voice.

"It is foolish and wicked," he faltered.

"*Wish!*" repeated his wife.

He raised his hand. "I wish my son alive again."

The talisman fell to the floor, and he regarded it fearfully. Then he sank trembling into a chair as the old woman, with burning eyes, walked to the window and raised the blind.

He sat until he was chilled with the cold, glancing occasionally at the figure of the old woman peering through the window. The candle-end, which had burned below the rim of the china candlestick, was throwing pulsating shadows on the ceiling and walls, until, with a flicker larger than the rest, it expired. The old man, with an unspeakable sense of relief at the failure of the talisman, crept back to his bed, and a minute or two afterward the old woman came silently and apathetically beside him.

Neither spoke, but lay silently listening to the ticking of the clock. A stair creaked, and a squeaky mouse scurried noisily through the wall. The darkness was oppressive, and after lying for some time screwing up his courage, he took the box of matches, and striking one, went downstairs for a candle.

At the foot of the stairs the match went out, and he paused to strike another; and at the same moment a knock, so quiet and stealthy as to be scarcely audible, sounded on the front door.

The matches fell from his hand and spilled in the passage. He stood motionless, his breath suspended until the knock was repeated. Then he turned and fled swiftly back to his room, and closed the door behind him. A third knock sounded through the house.

"*What's that?*" cried the old woman, starting up.

"A rat," said the old man in shaking tones—"a rat. It passed me on the stairs."

His wife sat up in bed listening. A loud knock resounded through the house.

"It's Herbert!" she screamed. "It's Herbert!"

She ran to the door, but her husband was before her, and catching her by the arm, held her tightly.

"What are you going to do?" he whispered hoarsely.

"It's my boy; it's Herbert!" she cried, struggling mechanically. "I forgot it was two miles away. What are you holding me for? Let go. I must open the door."

"For God's sake don't let it in," cried the old man, trembling.

"You're afraid of your own son," she cried, struggling. "Let me go. I'm coming, Herbert; I'm coming."

There was another knock, and another. The old woman with a sudden wrench broke free and ran from the room. Her husband followed to the landing, and called after her appealingly as she hurried downstairs. He heard the chain rattle back and the bottom bolt drawn slowly and stiffly from the socket. Then the old woman's voice, strained and panting.

"The bolt," she cried, loudly. "Come down. I can't reach it."

But her husband was on his hands and knees groping wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in. A perfect fusillade of knocks reverberated through the house, and he heard the scraping of a chair as his wife put it down in the passage against the door. He heard the creaking of the bolt as it came slowly back, and at the same moment he found the monkey's paw, and frantically breathed his third and last wish.

The knocking ceased suddenly, although the echoes of it were still in the house. He heard the chair drawn back, and the door opened. A cold wind rushed up the staircase, and a long loud wail of disappointment and misery from his wife gave him courage to run down to her side, and then to the gate beyond. The street lamp flickering opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road.

A Song of Spring: A Sword Fit For A King

Part 5: The Edge of their World

AR Green

x.com/Outside_of_Time

Kildan awoke. The morning light, breaking into the room through a crack in the curtains, fell softly upon Lunella's face. He lay watching the slow rise and fall of his wife's chest, the Leodman smiled to himself. Lunella stirred, she stretched and then reached toward her husband's side of the bed. Kildan took her hand to his chest and slipped his other arm around her. He lay enjoying the warmth of his wife and the morning sun.

"Good morning, my love" whispered Kildan.

Lunella smiled, and snuggled in close to her husband.

"I know it's selfish, but I wish you didn't have to go. I wish our King had chosen another of his Leodmen to go south of that awful river."

"It was not his choice - the Gods showed him the way, and fate should not be bent on a whim," he said, gently kissing her upon the forehead.

She nodded, a lone tear rolling down her cheek. As he wiped it away, Kildan smiled, "My sweet Lunella, save these for the day I go on to the halls of my forefathers. They will be the stars that guide me on the right path."

"Then I'll try to save them for that day," she said, smiling as she wiped away more tears from her bright green eyes.

Kildan held her tightly, "I'll do everything I can to make it back to you, my love."

"I don't doubt you, but there isn't a man or woman alive in this kingdom that doesn't know what lies beyond the river to the south. Men go into those lands, and they don't come back."

Kildan felt his wife hug him more tightly, then slowly her grip loosened. She let him go and he eased his way out of the bed. The Leodman walked over to the window and drew back the curtains, the light came flooding in. Kildan looked out over his lands - the sun hung low surrounded by grey clouds, casting dark shadows over the rolling fields and hills. He pushed off the sill and began pulling on his clothes. Lunella sat up, stretched and walked over to a chest of drawers - she reached behind it, and pulled out a sword in a sheath.

"I had this made for you as a gift for the hunt of the solstice, but seeing as you won't be here for it..." said Lunella, unwrapping the belt and holding it out toward her husband.

Kildan smiled, lifting his arms. The Leodwoman took the belt and passed it around his waist, fastening it tightly. He stepped back and drew the sword. The Leodman looked it up and down; the etching on the blade showed Solorin holding his sword aloft, with sunbeams shining behind him - alongside an inscription that read, 'WALK IN HOLY LIGHT, CARRY THE GOD'S MIGHT'.

"It's beautiful - thank you," he said; Lunella reached out, stopping him from sheathing the sword. She took the blade in two hands and pressed her lips to it, kissing the flat steel. Kildan watched as his wife ran her fingers along the edge, feeling the sharpness. She squeezed the blade until blood dripped down from her hands.

"Oh Lunestria, goddess of love and life, I give my life blood for the blessing of this sword. May it always strike true and, when times grow dark, may it shine as brightly as the love I hold for my husband."

Lunella handed the sword back to Kildan - he held it up to the sunlight, watching the blood running along its edge. A fresh pattern of red runes danced on the steel. The Leodman held the blade out until it had dried, then sheathed it.

Kildan walked over to a small table by his bedside and took a cloth from it. He turned back to his wife and she gave him her hand; wrapping the cut, he kissed her softly. He placed his hands over hers, feeling the warmth of her blood - bowing his head, he spoke a few words in the old tongue. As he finished chanting, Kildan pulled away the cloth and the cut on his wife's hand was gone.

Kildan hugged his wife and kissed her once more on the forehead, before heading out of the room to get himself some breakfast. The laughter bouncing off the walls grew louder as the Leodman made his way to the hall. Upon opening the door and stepping inside, Kildan found his guardsmen spread across a few tables; their chattering, and the smell of freshly baked bread hit him.

The men turned to face the door and upon seeing their Leodman, they hastily put down their food and stood. Kildan nodded, before speaking -

"Those of you that are to follow me beyond the river, join me at my table."

Findan watched from the head table as a handful of men, young and old, from each of the tables stepped out over their benches following their Leodman. Kildan sat down and the men did the same; looking around the table he saw many faces that were well known to him. A good number of the men had been his oathsworn knights that fought alongside him in the Bleuwoods just days ago. A few fresh faces looked back at him too, including Nordon the stableboy, sitting at his son's right hand.

"You have all been brave enough to follow me up the steps to eat at my table, now eat quickly men. We ride for the town of Gurord as soon as we've all eaten our fill." The men quickly piled more food onto their plates and dug in.

"To the rest of you, I wish you a good hunt. May Solorin guide your spears and arrows into the hearts of the fiends that have taken root in our beloved lands," he shouted down to the rest of the men in the hall.

The Leodman looked down at the table nearest to him and spotted the man he had chosen to lead the hunt, "Harod, join me at my table".

The ranger slung his leg across the bench and stood up again, sweeping his dark hair away from his face.

Harod nodded his head and picked up his wooden plate, and made his way to the Leodman's table. Kildan piled food onto his plate, then turned to the ranger.

"Have you led men before?"

"Aye, every Sudracang ranger that lives long enough ends up leading one way or another."

Kildan nodded slowly, a look of grim understanding spread across his face.

"Did you lose many?"

"Too many to count; I lost good men, bad men and all kinds of men in between."
"Is that why you aren't willing to ride with me?"

"Aye … and nay. On my last ranging something unsettled the horses from the start. We rode for three days without much trouble, then on the third day we were attacked by cearulves with no warning. Half the men went down without a fight, the other half were badly wounded. On the fourth day the captain died of his wounds, leaving me in charge. I alone made it across the river. I swore I would not go back; the beasts of those lands have grown much too strong."

"So you fled, rather than fall with your men?"

"I did what I was trained to do," said Harod, looking away.

"I see - if you're going to lead the hunt in the Bleuwoods, you can't turn and run. You put your life on the line as one of my folk."

Harod turned and slowly met Kildan's gaze.

"There's honour in dying for folks and lands you love. Out there, in the Borderlands, there's nowt to love and no honour to be found. The salt of the old ways is sewn too deep for owt to grow. You have shown me great kindness letting me build a home in your lands. I'll fight and die as one of your men, guarding what you are building here."

"Good. When you ride out into the Bleuwoods and put the beasts to the sword, tell the people who sent you," said Kildan, nodding and sitting back in his chair.

"I will, and a word of warning m'Leod. Once you cross the river, do your best to stay off the roads. Hwiliks wander them day and night. If you see any, try not to get too close, they're brutal. If you have to fight 'em, strike at the neck - taking their heads off is the only way I've ever seen 'em killed."

"Thanks, may Solorin guide you," said Kildan, breaking off some of his bread and dipping it in a bowl of honey.

After finishing eating, Kildan leant over to his son and whispered, "One day they will all be yours to lead. They will not always listen, they will not always win and they will not all be equal; but you should love them - they are of you, and you are of them. What is best for our folk and those yet to come, is also best for us, son."

Findan nodded and whispered back, "But how will I know what is best?"

Kildan laughed, "You won't. Sometimes you will fail them. Sometimes what is best will feel awful as you're doing it. Nonetheless, that should always be your goal - to build our folk up."

Findan finished his breakfast; his father's words still rolling through his mind like an overburdened cart. He watched the men finish eating, and thought about what would be best for them. He tried thinking of their families, then their villages, and towns. So many men, women and children… Children, he thought of those yet to come. Thousands of souls resting on the shoulders of so few. The Mearcian's mind turned to the King, so much weight on one man's shoulders.

Findan looked back to his father, "I hope getting the sword is what is best for our people."

Kildan smiled, "If the King says it is what is best for this kingdom, then we must trust him."

The men stood from the benches, and said their goodbyes to the hunting party staying behind to drive the cearulves from the Bleuwoods. Harod and his son hugged, and the young man followed the Leodman from his table. Kildan led his men out of the hall and ordered the horses be made ready. Nordon spotted a young boy running around the stable with saddle in hand; he walked over to him and reached over, helping the lad hoist it onto an animal's back.

"You're doing a fine job, little brother. You take good care of mam and our sisters while I'm away."

The boy finished fixing the saddle and turned to face Nordon. He hugged him tightly.
"You be careful - come back whole."

Nordon smiled and nodded. He took the freshly saddled horse by the reins and walked it out onto the courtyard before climbing atop it.

"Have you done much riding Nordon?" asked Findan.

"More than some, but less than others m'Leod. My father had been teaching me."

"Good, there's a long road ahead."

Findan walked off to the stablehand to get his own horse. A few folk began spilling out of the keep to see off the men. Lunella stepped out of the doorway with Florence and Ella by her side. The two girls rushed to their father, tears flowing, to say their goodbyes; Kildan hugged each of his girls tightly, before standing. The Leodwoman made her way to her husband -

"You take care of him and yourself. I'll pray everyday for you to bring them back safe."

"I will. I'll come back to you - I always do."

Lunella leant in and kissed him, before he mounted his horse. He waited for the rest of the men to say their farewells. The two girls and their mother spotted Findan coming out of the stables, holding onto the reins of his horse. Findan's sisters ran over and hugged him; followed shortly by their mother, who wrapped her arms around him and held onto him as tightly as if her life depended on it. As she pulled him down to kiss him on each cheek, Findan could see the pattern of his mail upon the side of her face.

"You be careful son. Follow your father's lead and don't do anything stupid. We will all miss you terribly, but I know you are going to make us proud. I love you."

"I love you all too," he said, ruffling Florence's hair. The young Mearcian then climbed up onto his horse, and made his way over to his father.

Kildan called for the men to mount up. The crowd of folk gathered, putting on brave faces as they waved off their fathers, brothers, and sons.

The party rode out of the gates and headed along the southern road. Dark skies overhead painted the rolling plains in mottled shades of brown and green. Kildan smiled to himself; no matter what weather the Gods gave to his lands, it did nothing to lessen his love for them. The riders joked and chatted, making their way along the dirt path.

After riding for half a day, they came upon a few thatched huts huddled together around a wooden statue of Lodric. As the men made their way into the heart of the village, a crowd of folks gathered around. A man, with thinning grey hair, stepped forward and bowed before Kildan.

"M'Leod, as the Yhemreeve of this village it be my honour to welcome you. Yer rider passed through yesterday, he told me to ready men to send on with you to the Borderlands."

"Yes, I need five good men from you."

The old man turned to face the crowd, "You heard the Leodman - get yerselves ready, say yer goodbyes to yer families." The Yhemreeve snapped back around to Kildan, "There's been strange happenings these last few weeks. A handful of farmers on the outskirts of our village have been losing livestock at night. Folks whisper o' dark beasts roaming in our lands. There were a rough storm three weeks past, knocked over some trees. I sent some of the young lads looking along the river, and they found one bridging it," said the old man.

"What did they do with it?"

"Nothing, it was too heavy for them to move. The tide will take care of it soon enough, the rain's been heavier these last couple of weeks too - should wash it out."

"Ok. Those of you riding with me, come forward," shouted the Leodman.

Five young men stepped forward from the crowd.

KIldan looked the men up and down - a dark haired man, who shared the same jawline and nose as the old man, stood out.

"I take it you're the Yhemreeve's son?"

"Yes m'Leod," said the dark haired man.

Kildan nodded and said to Findan, "We'll need a bridge able to bear the weight of a horse and rider," before turning back to the grey haired man.

"Give my son as many men as you can spare, and have the bridge built before I get back from Gurord," said Kildan.

"I will make sure the good folk of my village do all they can to help your son, m'Leod," said the Yhemreeve.

Kildan nodded, "Thank you, I will be back in two days time with more men to stand watch over the bridge after we've crossed into the Borderlands."

The Leodman and his son rode away from the crowd, "Think you can have it done in two days?"

"I'll get it done," said Findan.

"Good, this should be simple. Just let the village men do their work and keep an eye out for anything south of the river. Do not be afraid to take down the bridge if a large pack of cearulves turns up. We can always build another bridge further along the river."

Findan nodded to his father, "I'll have the men build a watchtower if there is time."

"That would be good - work quickly, son. I will be back before you know it."

Kildan turned to face the rest of his riders - "Nordon, Alasdair, Alwin, Caflice, Wyne, Ordway, and the five of you from this village - you are to follow my son's lead. I want that bridge ready when I return in two days. The rest of you, follow me," said the Leodman, turning his horse and setting off out of the village.

Kildan looked back over his shoulder as he led the band out of the settlement, and watched his son hopping down from his horse and talking with the village folk.

The party rode along the old road until they came to the first fork of the River Thregar.

"Look m'Leod, over there," shouted out one of the riders, pointing into the grass.

Kildan's gaze followed the man's finger to a small charred patch of earth, off the south side of the road.

"You two, ride on and take a closer look; but be careful," said Kildan, pointing at the man and the rider next to him.

The pair left the path and slowly started making their way to the blackened ground. Looking down, they started poking at something with their spears, then turned back to the party. They shouted out to Kildan, "There's no signs of a campfire, it looks like one of those fiends was felled here."

Kildan shouted to the men, "Okay, leave it and get back over here quickly!" The men put their heels into their horses; as they neared the group they saw that Kildan was watching a patch of brush nearby the burned land. The thick brambles rustled and the party watched quietly, readying bows and arrows. A young boar trotted out of the bush and, upon seeing the men, wheeled away squealing. Nervous laughter spread through the band. Kildan felt the tension fading a little bit, but the men still kept tight hold of their weapons.

The Leodman set off again, leading the way. As they reached a white stone bridge, the sun began dipping below the western treeline. In the dim light, patchy repairwork could be made out, scattered across the white stones; the fine details left by imperial craftsmen were fading away, worn smooth under many feet.

Kildan led his men onto the bridge; he stopped halfway across, turning to face the setting sun. He watched the waters of the River Thregar flowing slowly below. The Leodman felt a cool breeze on his face as he looked from the riverbanks of the mainland to that of Marche Island that Gurord sat on. He could see what was left of the latest attempt at building a new bridge, a short way along the river; more empty build sites dotted the shore of the island. The old imperial bridge was still to this day the only safe way to cross the three hundred foot span of water.

Once they had made it over, Kildan ordered his men to set up camp under the bridge. The night came and went without any trouble. The men woke with the morning sun, and began packing up their gear.

"Leave everything where it is - we'll sleep here tonight," said the Leodman. He left five men to watch over the camp, and the rest of the party set off.

As they rode, Kildan saw the strange plants with a bright purple flower the island was famous for; they were the same colour as the cloak on his back. Large stretches of the road had been covered by them too - only the old imperial waystones gave any hint where the path lay. After passing a few small farms, the grand white and

purple city walls of Gurord rose before them on a hill overlooking the island.

As they came to the city gate, a guard called down to them, “Who goes there?”

“Do you not recognise your own Leodman, Kildan of Southstan?”, shouted up a fresh faced lad from the party.

The guard eyed the band unsurely; he leaned over to one of the other guards and, after a few words were traded, he shouted back down to the Leodman.

“Welcome to Gurord, m’Leod.”

Turning to his young knight, Kildan said, “Thank you Kieren, I do not visit these lands often.”

The youth nodded, as a large iron gate slowly hoisted upward. The party followed their Leodman through the gateway into the city. Old buildings of the empire scattered the streets, most lay empty. It seemed most of the city’s folk lived on the main street that ran from the city gates to the forum, at the heart of the settlement.

As they rode further, the men looked down the empty streets and alleys, seeing more old imperial buildings; most were little more than rubble now. The purple flowering vines that grew on the bridge had taken over large parts of the town; they sprouted from every nook and cranny. The few folks that they did see, looked as queer and run-down as the land. The way they talked, even the way they moved, seemed entirely alien to the Leodman and his men. Kildan knew of the myths these folk told themselves; the islanders prided themselves as being the last children of the old empire. Now was not the time to step on any toes - even if they were in odd shoes.

When the men made it to the square, having passed along the main street, a small crowd was following them.

“Where is the Yhemreeve?” asked Kildan, of the crowd.

The group of townsfolk stood watching, before a man stepped forward and spoke.

“I shall fetch our mayor, m’Leod,” said the man.

Kildan raised an eyebrow, “Good, make haste.”

The man hurried off toward a large house overlooking the square. The building had four white marble pillars at the front, reaching as tall as Kildan’s keep, and a stained glass window showing the old god of the empire pinned to a tree. The Leodman looked around while he waited. The old imperial buildings stood offering a ghostly glimpse into the glory of the empire that once was, and the only purple flowers here sat neatly in large stone bowls. A few more townsfolk had gathered, before two towering bronze doors of the Mayor’s home glided open. Kildan’s men watched open mouthed as a small man stepped out of the doorway.

“My Leod, welcome. I am Peter, mayor of this city, what brings you to us on this fine day?”

“I take it my messenger did not reach you then?”

“We’ve had no riders or messages, m’Leod,” said Peter.

The Leodman sighed, rubbing at his brow.

“I need as many good men as you can arm with horse and spear, to ride with me into the Borderlands.”

“But that is suicide m’Leod. I…” the small man stammered and came to a stop, squirming under the weight of the Leodman’s gaze.

“I.. I can spare fifteen m’Leod! I’m sure you’ve seen that this is not a thriving city - in truth, we are little more than a village in the ruins. If I were to give you any more, I’d be risking our defences.”

Kildan nodded, “Fifteen will follow me into the Borderlands. Thirty more will be needed to guard the tree that has fallen, bridging the river to the east.”

Peter stroked the red whiskers on his chin for a while, “We have seen unrest beyond the river in recent days. I will have our captain choose his fifteen best men to go with you beyond the river, and our Lieutenant take thirty men to see that no unwelcome guests make it over the bridge.”

“Good, have your men keep an eye out for my messenger too. I’m hoping he just got lost on the road here.”

The mayor nodded, then turned to a guardsman by his door, “You there, go find Micha and Paul. Tell Micha to gather fifteen of his best men to ride into the Borderlands with the Leodman. Tell Paul to gather thirty men to guard a bridge along the river to our east. Have them meet the Leodman at the city gates."

The guard nodded and rushed off.

“Would you care to join me for brunch, m’Leod?” asked the Mayor.

“No thank you, but I will take some food supplies for the journey. I will wait at the gates,” said the Leodman, turning and leading his party away.

The band made their way back along the old street and waited. The sun had climbed high into the sky overhead when forty-five men, riding ten abreast down the street, made their way to the Leodman, followed by a wagon carrying food. Two men led from the front and rode forward to meet Kildan.

“M’Leod, I am Micha, Captain of the Guard, and this is my Lieutenant Paul,” said the guardsman pointing to the man alongside him, who nodded.

“Well met Micha, which of these brave souls will be riding with me into the Borderlands?” asked Kildan.

“Reivers, form up!” shouted Micha; fourteen horsemen rode forward to stand alongside their captain. Their mail shirts were tattered with patches of red rust, speckling the black rings. A few men wore only leather jerkins. Kildan took stock of the so-called reivers - though their armour and arms were second rate at best, their faces looked to be carved from stone.

“These are the best men Gurord has to offer; these fourteen of the reivers, and I, will gladly accompany you into the Borderlands to serve the King,” said the captain.

Kildan nodded and spoke loudly, “Our King has given me a hard task. I have been asked to find the sword of Lodric the Great, and put it into his hands. The fate of the kingdom rests on it. Those of you not of stout heart, turn back now; those of you that seek glory in this life and the next, ride with me.”

The men all nodded, then fell in line behind Kildan. A crowd of folk had made their way along the street, and began lining the stretch toward the gates.

Micha waved to the gatehouse, and the iron gate began lifting. The cityfolk watched the band passing under the gate; at first the people had been curious, but that had faded away now and the Leodman could see dread written upon the faces of the men and women he passed. They knew where their men were going, Kildan caught a few quiet curses being muttered as he left.

As he rode, Kildan turned to Micha, "What of the bridge to the south - does it still lie in ruin?" he asked.
"Yes m'Leod. My forefathers tried to fix it, but that was long ago - some links are best left broken."

As they rode, Kildan looked more carefully at the captain. Micha was older than he had first taken him for; his brown hair was peppered with grey streaks. Of all the men that had joined them from Gurord, he was the only one whose mail did not have a patch of rust upon it.

"It would seem that way, Captain. Yet fate, as ever, has a way of winning every play. The storm, three weeks past, knocked over a tree - it has bridged the river. I fear monsters have crossed into our lands; we must cross into theirs to turn back the tides," said Kildan.

"The sword could do that, but none have seen it for centuries," said Micha.

"That was true, until it came to the King in one of his dreams. We will be the first men to lay eyes on it since the fall of the empire," said Kildan.

The captain's jaw dropped. He didn't say another word for the rest of the ride.

When they reached the camp, the men set to guard it took some much needed rest. The newcomers set up their tents, whilst the men unloaded the food and sent the wagon back to the city. There was little room left under the bridge - the camp began spilling out onto the riverbank. When time came for dinner to be served, Kildan tried to get the two groups to mix by inviting Micha to break bread with him. The captain sat by the Leodman, telling stories of what it was like living so close to the Borderlands. The reivers mixed a bit, but the Leodman could see that Paul and the men sent to guard the bridge ate on their own. As the fires died down, the men climbed into their tents for the night. Kildan ordered some of the men, old and new, to stand watch together. He climbed into his bedroll, and shut out the world.

Come morn, Kildan awoke and clambered outside. The camp had been swallowed by thick grey fog, the dim orange glow of torches hung in the mist.

"It will pass in an hour or two m'Leod, the fog is common in these parts," said Micha.

"Thanks Captain, have your men ready to go."

Kildan made his way to the fire, a few men sat around it cooking breakfast. They offered him a pot of porridge; he thanked them, and drained the small wooden cup quickly. After an hour or so had passed, the fog still hadn't lifted.

"We will make our way back to the new bridge. Keep the river on your right hand side, and we'll stay off the roads."

The band packed up the camp and set off riding along the river. The men followed closely so as not to lose each other in the fog. Night was beginning to fall when a cry came from up ahead.

"WHO GOES THERE?" shouted Wyne, through the fog.

"THE PARTY OF KILDAN, AND THE GUARDSMEN OF GURORD!" shouted back Kieren, at the head of the party.

There was a sigh of relief from the two watchmen standing on their makeshift tower.

"When I saw the orange lights of your torches bobbing about in the dark, I feared more of those beasts were upon us," said Caflice.

Kildan rode forward, "Not today friend. Rest easy, the city of Gurord has sent thirty men to help watch the bridge. Now, where is my son?"

Eagle's Flight 6

AR Duncan

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The sea. The sea, the sea, the sea. Endless and all consuming. He was sick of it. With favourable winds and tides the crossing from Treowick to Stratysca would only have taken six days, but here they were two weeks in and with likely five days still ahead of them. But waiting on tides and winds was not a luxury the situation afforded the prince of Treowick. The noose had been closing quickly and time was running out. Much like war, Beadmund had been thrust onto the sea from childhood he got no pleasure from it, yet it was better than spending the rest of his life in that den of vipers, and at the pace things were going that life could have been cut all too short. Just twenty days ago Talhearn, that Stratyscan young man he had fought alongside only a year ago, had arrived in Treowick bring with him an offer from King Armel of Stratysca. The kid was lucky to be alive. He had followed his commands to the letter and had first tried to approach both Beadmund's father and uncle. Talhearn had no clue what he was walking into and both men had bigger concerns, not only refusing his plea but also threatening his life if he was not out of the city by the end of the day. But not being deterred, a day later he found Beadmund in an unpopular drinking establishment and the plan had begun to take shape.

Now here he was in the midst of open sea in the first of ten boats that had fled silently into the night after less than a week's planning. The risks were too high to include all the men he wished he had been able to bring but they could travel over later once the war was won. On this first voyage were, apart from his uncle's closest men, nearly all the men who had fought at Dunbrig and a handful of others, mostly merchants who plied their goods back and across the sea and knew these foreign lands well. All these men had brought with them assorted brothers, and sons, and wives, and children. It was a group many times larger than had crossed the previous year but this time it was a war against a force at least five times larger and the war effort was going to require the full and total destruction of the foe's towns and the erasure of their people and then the resettling of a land ravaged by war with limited resources and people. Beadmund wanted nothing less but as always the fates pulled him onwards whether he consented or not to this laughable task. And here in this still lifeless ocean it felt all the more fragile. Ten wooden petals, feeble things but the best that man could build, floated idly through the expanse that would kill them all in an instant if it could.

Beadmund paced his way from the stern to the bow of the ship, the full limits of his territory in this unceasing plain promising openness and freedom. He had seen prisoners given more space than this. At the fronts of the boat Talhearn sat on a pile of ropes covered in a dark green canvas, as he peered off into the horizon and the lands beyond that revealed themselves only to him. When the Stratyscan man wasn't confined to his seat rowing, this is all he would do to pass the time. He would talk to the other men if they came to join him, he had taken to the Seaxing language with remarkable alacrity, but the seas could give him more than any man or woman ever could. The indescribable expanse, the freedom, the ever repeating emptiness, the cruelty.

The two men sat together in silence. One wishing it would last a lifetime. The other wishing he was anywhere else.

"I don't understand how you don't see it. She's the most beautiful mistress a man could want. Unfathomable depths to plumb and endless shores to be discovered".

"But once you reach those depths how many wrecks will you find? How many corpses? How many men thought the same as you and now lie dead?"

Beadmund had expressed his hatred with a passion that he mean in full sincerity but hadn't quite expected. Talhearn only let out a chuckle.

"All the greatest mistresses would kill their lovers if they could. That what enthrals us in the first place. The secrets she must hold, the game of the conquest. Countless scores of men have died before you but you might finally be the one who tames her. And the one who brings her to heel will die rich and shall never be forgotten".

The thought of having a mistress stirred nothing in Beadmund and even less the idea of one who wanted him dead. He had known woman before, his uncles men had made sure of that early into his time away fighting, but they had always stirred little in him. Maybe something to return to at a later date but likely not worth the time he would waste. Even more, there were enough men out there who wanted him dead without the need to add women as well. Talhearn had known neither women nor death but seemed ambivalent to both.

"I've always loved the sea. The endless push and pull of the beating heart of the Earth herself. Every spring I would go the harbour to watch the first of the traders arriving in their ships, from up north where the barbarians live, across the ocean where you Seaxings call you home and down south where the remnants of the empire have not yet fallen. I cannot ever forget that ship from the south, her sails with such vibrant and decadent colours I do not believe I shall ever see again. I'd never even imagined their existence yet all the men wore the same with long flowing tunics and belts, most with nothing to cover their legs underneath. They say that where they come from it is warm all year round and that the trees never lose their leaves and the crops never cease to grow, but I'm sure you've heard all the stories too. This ship, she came for many years in a row but when I was nine or ten one of the men, I was too young to understand he rank but I'm sure he was important, saw me watching from a shore and with his wide open smile and deep set hazel eyes nestled in tanned skin, he invited me to come aboard to show me the ship.

"I remember every last plank, nail, and rope of her. Where every barrel, crate, and hammock was placed and when she left, I wanted nothing more than to leave with that warm hearted sailor to his lands in the south and

from there see the whole world and live my life forever at sea. But even then I knew I have duties. I have a family. My father is head of the king's household you know, and try as I might, even at that young age, I could not convince myself that right was wrong. I could not just leave I couldn't do it. The gods would know.

"She returned the following year but the kind man who had guided me was not with her. I was terrified that he might have given up the life and taken to land ruining the perfect gift he had been given. I was too afraid of the answer to ask the crew what had happened to him preferring to live in shadow, but years later I discovered he had been swept overboard in a storm on the journey home. A fitting death for a sailor and more glorious than a return to land. I'll get away one day".

If any of the other Stratyscan young men had been present they would have rolled their eyes and held back a comment. They had all heard this story many times before and even Beadmund could tell that the story was well rehearsed. He wanted to push back but what could he say against a man who had made up his mind. He was devoted beyond compare. The ocean does strange things to men. To the man accustomed only to land she steals your freedom day by day. You are alone in the great unconstrained emptiness with nothing around and yet you are entirely at her mercy without the liberty to choose your own destiny. She brings men closer to the fates and their capricious whims than anywhere on the land. On land man has a say in his destiny, upon the waves the uninitiated believes this to be taken from him. It takes a strange sort of man to understand the true freedom she grants him. Beadmund did not wish to be anyone's plaything, and with the irreverence only a youth could manage he even champed against the bit that the fates placed in his mouth. Beadmund had seen men die, seen bodies dragged ashore bloated and decaying and he did not want to be one of them. He wanted to be alone away foes to endlessly battle and the web of politics that kept him trapped and used him like a toy. A land on its own with no neighbours. The only part of his companion's plight he did understand was to be bound by duty. The farm was no more reasonable than the desire for the seas. Beadmund had already broken the most serious bonds that held him to his father but he would do his best to rebuild what he could from the ashes. He would win this war and settle a new home and if fate called him to lead, he would. He would marry and have a child, someone to carry on his rule once he was gone. He would live peacefully, but if duty called him to fight once again, he would. But these were not ambitions. Not aspirations only a begrudging response to the fates. To both his companion and the fates, he only responded with silence.

The boat rocked up and down upon the blue mountains ranges that appeared and disappeared beneath them as warring gods of creation formed and reformed the face of the very earth they passed over. The war waged ever onward with victory intangible. Through this anarchy, ten ships languished had remaining close throughout the voyage. They had prepared well but even so were at risk of running out of provisions but much as Beadmund despised the great mistress of the ocean, she was eager to provide for them. Though the time spent floating listlessly out here with no propulsion but their own manpower was time that the war drew onwards and the risks grew. Stratysca was alone at risk from her enemies and her king. Far behind the fleet the dark and cloudy sky moved ever closer by the day but despite the promise of strong winds following them from their launch, they were left in the quiet still of the churning ocean.

"What do you think will have happened by the time we make landing?" Talhearn asked daring to break the mutually self-imposed silence.

"Not much I would hope. Meildun is in no position to strike first and the other kingdoms are too far away for an early assault on Stratysca. It's up to them to make the first move and they would not be wise to act until we have arrived".

The convoy was bound for the north of Meildun where the fighting men could march south and quickly take the city and those that remained could set about building a town and fortifying it.

"They haven't always acted entirely wisely though have they? If they've already marched out? What then?"

"We try to fix their mess. We fight. Possibly die. What more can we do? You Stratyscans can return Dunbrig, pay some money, and send a few of your boys off as prisoners, but us Seaxings have nothing to return to. We've fled from our city and the den of snakes won't take lightly to us returning. Either I'm a threat returning back to take the throne or I'm the prodigal son who fled at the hour of his father's greatest need. At least if we win it'll be a self-imposed exile. They'll think me so inconsequential and remote as to not be of threat".

"We'll win. Our king may be mad but all theirs are weak willed".

Silence reigned once more.

After a while, the young men returned to their duties on their rowing bench and as they heaved back and forth pulling their great vessel through the mistress loved or despised they felt the cool hands of fate behind them and begin to push them onward. A wind had stirred and filled the sail to bursting like a grain sack in time of plenty and all the passengers let out a cry of relief. The ocean had decided to show mercy on them that day and they would arrive on the shores on their new home before the week was out.

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Life at the Edge of the Curve

AR Green

I long for something old and new
I long for something bold and true

I long for the sun, the wind, and rain.
I long for the earth, the sword, and flame.

I long for heroes time forgot
I long for memories yet begot.

I long for sovereignty and justice wrought.
I long for a time when we do as we ought

I long for order and holy light.
I long for peace and sacred night.

I long for home, the land of my kin
I long to be rid of the evil within.

Yet above all else, the noise and din.
I long for the crownless to again stand as king.

The English are dead, Long live the Anglo Saxons.

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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