

# CORNCRAKE

A person is silhouetted against a vast, starry night sky, standing on the crest of a large sand dune. The person is holding a flashlight, which illuminates the sand in front of them. The sky is filled with numerous stars and the faint, glowing band of the Milky Way galaxy stretches across the upper portion of the frame. The overall scene is serene and evocative, suggesting a sense of exploration and discovery.

FEB 2026  
ISSUE 24

Glasgow 22nd Street  
William Riverdale

Algernon Blackwood  
Fyodor Dostoevsky  
Kenneth Graham  
Breton Riviere

Luke Gilfedder  
Edward White

NESTING IN THE OAK OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE

# Nathan Hood hosts The Merry Corncrakes Podcast

Treat yourself to interviews with feature authors and audiobooks of stories appearing in the Corncrake, together with sophisticated discussions on writing and story creation. Watch it now!



## TABLE OF CONTENTS



### MODERN AUTHORS

---

Editor's Note	04
Roses of Shadow Ch 2	05
Earl the Dragon Slayer	11
Glasgow 22 <sup>nd</sup> Street	21



### ART

---

Breton Riviere	38
----------------	----



### CLASSIC TALES & POETRY

---

The Dean of Lismore's Book	10
The Wind in the Willows Ch 2	29
Polzunkov	33
The Willows	38
The Forlorn Shepherd's Complaint	51



Visit

[CORNCRACKEMAG.COM](http://CORNCRACKEMAG.COM)

For back issues, book and art reviews and more.



The Corncrake magazine promotes the best works in English literature, from the beginning of civilisation to the present and beyond.

Celebrating great stories, poems and essays by classic authors.

Featuring beautiful and arresting artwork by renowned painters.

Providing a platform for up-and-coming writers and artists.

From great names like Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Anthony Trollope, to writers of the future like Nathan CJ Hood, Luke Gilfedder, and ND Wallace Swan, the Corncrake sets before you the imaginative, vital, and beautiful soul of the English literary and aesthetic tradition.

By reading this magazine, you are contributing to the preservation of our rich literary and artistic heritage, acquainting yourself with the beauties of the English language and the stories passed onto us by our forebears.

You are also supporting contemporary and independent artists and authors who are engaging with the stories and artworks of the past to create new tales and paintings for our time.

Happy Reading!

*shieldmaiden*

Editor-in-Chief

Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape?... If we value the freedom of mind and soul, if we're partisans of liberty, then it's our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as we can!  
JRR Tolkien

# Roses of Shadow

## Chapter II: The Archiabbas's Secret

Luke Gilfedder



Tyniec Abbey Poland

Luke Gilfedder is a writer from Manchester. He has 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 modernist writer Wyndham Lewis.

His fiction has been published in the Decadent Serpent and The Brazen Head magazines and he regularly contributes essays on The Miskatonian and the Lewisletter journal.

Twitter: @lukegilfedder

The door closed behind Miro as mysteriously and gratefully as it had opened. He stood alone in the withering silence of the cloisters—their far-stretching colonnades shadowy, rubicund, and wisteriaed. Inhaling the stony moist air, he tiptoed down the marble-flagged corridor, the last rays of twilight pouring through the arches like maple syrup. Not for the first time, Miro reflected on why the church's "beautiful portal" opened onto the cloister rather than the exterior: it emphasised that the church was built for monks, not for pilgrims. Not for outsiders. Not for him.

The cloisters enclosed a rose garden, following Saint Benedict's prescription in his *Regula* that a monastery must always have a garden within its perimeter. Father Quintus said it symbolised paradise, or the enclosed garden—*hortus conclusus*—from Solomon's Song of Songs. And it looked just like paradise to Miro this evening: the regimented lindens leaning white above a dark pool, the correctly managed shadows, the straight paths of pink brick, the tall ogival windows of dusty cells, the ivied scholarly towers, the ancient sonority of the stone slabs under his heels... Eleven centuries had passed around this cloistered walkway, Miro thought—eleven centuries leaving no echo, no sign of all that the outer world, for good or evil, had been doing so fiercely, so raucously. If anything happened outside these walls, it either didn't happen or didn't matter.

All around the abbey now, the violence of twilight was failing, its light crumbling momentarily from the myriad towers and spires. Miro swept his gaze above the arches of the cloisters, where a terrace of rose-coloured brickwork circumscribed the quadrangle some twenty feet above the ground. Punctuating the rear wall of the high terrace were the doors to the monks' apartments, with Father Quintus's set at the far northern end. The Archiabbas was rarely seen outside of his study these days; he delegated Mass to his prior, the grizzled Father Anzelm. In his absence, the Archiabbas's reputation lived like a superfine antelope in the gorges of the Caucasus: each year, it grew more ethereal, more gentle.

With reverent feet, Miro stepped from the cloisters into the garden, crossing the paths between raked gravel and century-old turf. The bricks had been laid so that their narrow surfaces faced upwards—a contrivance that must have called for at least twice as many as would otherwise have been necessary. But what gave the path its peculiar character was the herringbone pattern which the monks had followed all those centuries ago. The bricks had breath in them. To walk across this garden was to walk across an idea.

The lustrous leaves of the lindens murmured in the twilight wind, their ace-of-spades shadows quivering on the gravelled path and along the marble margin of the pool. Miro glimpsed his reflection, darkly mirrored in the glassy water. It was like turning a corner and colliding with a stranger: an enigma of sixteen stared back at him, with eyes a brilliant blue—as if blue were the best colour for fire—and a wavy mop of cider-red hair. It was true, what Leila said—he looked more like an elfin choirboy than a gypsy. Perhaps even like Millais's Christ, he thought with a faint savour of blasphemy... no, no, Christ's eyes held a calm expression, whereas his were restive.

Distantly, Miro heard a door slam with the kind of ill-fitting thud that comes from the far bank of a river where woodsmen are at work. A few seconds later, the cowed reflections of monks, stooping as they passed along the gallery to Saint Benedict's Chapel, came rippling along the water. Miro slid back into the shade and followed the linden allée to the northern wing of the cloisters. The weightless paw of a leafy shadow slipped from his shoulder as he turned up the stone staircase. Zsidó, he thought he heard, whispered from the shadows. Yet when he looked, no one was there. Zsidó—the antique Hungarian word for Jew. Ludicrously inexact, Miro knew, but ever since the gypsies had joined the

ranks of the abbey's refugees, the term had been press-ganged into service to include both populations. With an anxious feeling, almost the feeling of a criminal, Miro climbed the stairwell and slipped down a dark-stone corridor flanked by pale busts of former Arch Abbots. He kept his head down, ducking behind a rose-marbled column as two cellarers passed, one shaking the Hungarian Post and muttering:

"What's the world coming to? Every time you open the newspapers, it's Sex! Violence! Robbery!"

"And that's only the sports results."

Both laughed, though Miro heard the unease in it. With a swift turn, the cellarers disappeared into the refectory. Miro waited a beat, then soft-footed down the dark gallery, his light footfall echoing with a lonely sound. This corridor, with its own special stone smell and sombre duskiness of the light, was infinitely more fraught with significance and fatefulness than even the cloisters below. No novitiates, for one, were allowed up here.

Miro's eyes flitted over the doors on which, according to custom, each monk's name was added to the long list of former occupants—carefully printed on the black wood, their vertical columns of small, exact lettering all but filling the available space. He drew nearer to the oaken door at the end of the corridor, upon which Quintus's brass-plaquet name gleamed sedately. The tightness in Miro's stomach rose to his throat, and there became nearly a choking sensation. He raised his hand to knock, but stopped, his knuckles hovering millimetres from the wood. The door was ajar, and a velvety, vinyl voice crooned from the dark within:

*"All the rainbows in the sky  
Start to weep, then say goodbye  
You won't be seeing rainbows anymore..."*

Feeling an apprehension as invigorating as the iciest waters of a well, Miro inched the door open and stepped inside. The smell of the old study flowed toward him—the familiar odour of books and ink, attenuated by cold breeze from unhermetic windows, by white vestments hanging on the door, a faint dash of cologne water. Like all the abbey, the abbot's turret room was high, red, old, bare, with a musty chill in the air, as if the draughts blew in not from outside but from other centuries. A rosewood writing desk stood before a great bow window, lit by the dim glow of a lamp's green-glass shade. Through the leaded panes, sunset light rayed onto the shelves encircling the walls, illuminating the defenceless spines of books huddled in tight ranks—all of them offensively thick, leather-bound, polyglot. Only the stark papal white of an abbatial chair stood out from the background, its back to the door. Beyond it, bow windows looked eastward over garden and prairie, with the faraway snowy peak of Mount Bakony serving as backdrop.

*"Setting suns before they fall  
Echo to you, 'That's all, that's all'"*

Flickers from the lamp sent great, bouncing shadows leaping around the room; it felt so echoey, so awesome, so sanctified. Just as Miro's eyes fell on the horned gramophone, a voice from the chair intruded:

"Do you like the folk music of the twentieth century, my boy?"

Hardly a voice, though, from that shrunken wreck. Ninety? A hundred? Rather a dry reed: eroded, forced out of a ruined neck.

Miro took two steps toward the ancient abbas, moving with the careful steps of a pilgrim crossing the surface of a lake. He whispered: "I know nothing of it, Father." The gravity of the dark walnut floor was only barely alleviated by dust-mottled light pouring through the window. Over the Bakony skies, Miro saw a fiery cross flash. It exactly bisected one of the vine-clad panes. It was neon-red, and quivered upon the ashen grey of the sky.

"Father, I have a message—"

The abbot raised a shadowy hand as the song reached its shuddersome crescendo.

*"But you'll see lonely sunsets after all  
It's over, it's over, it's over  
It's oooo-vvveerrr..."*

A second laser flashed as the needle lifted from the groove, and the record whirred to a stop, its echo fading like the cry of an angel falling backwards through a window. From across the plain came the distant, ominous rumble of explosions. Yet these sounds only added to the weight of the room's sudden silence, just as the music of fountains emphasises, rather than diminishes, the quiet of a garden.

"It has a curious nostalgia, no?" the abbot said after a long minute. "My mother used to play it in our home. That sound... The Russians have a word for it... not nostal'giya... no, toska."

"Nostalgia isn't what it used to be, Father."

"No, no. Very true, my boy." Girdling his robe, the abbot rose, tall and slightly stooped, like a horseman. "Home... My home is but a word on a withered page." He dropped a yellowed tome on the desk with a leathery thwack. "All those factories, trains and houses... All is dead. Who cares, who understands? Not even God."

Miro raised his eyes at the figure towering thinly before the window. The hood veiled the abbot's face, but even the most searching gaze could see that the years of devoted service to the Brotherhood had not grossened Quintus's flesh. His profile conveyed a natural hauteur in the straight nose and complementarily angular cheeks: the face of an old Roman coin, scarce seen.

"Apologies, Miro, that I speak with the edge of cliché, for this world is not long from death, and we speak in simples as our experience approaches the enormous. You said you had a message for me?"

"Yes, Father, I—"

Miro broke off as the abbot lowered his hood. In the roseal light, he looked just like the official portrait Miro had studied in the scriptorium, so familiar was Miro with the magnificent geography of that superb face: the lofty brow surmounted by a thinned quiff of silver-red hair, the light lines seemingly drawn there not by nature, but by the man himself—they had so voluntary an appearance. And as to the expression of the abbot's stately countenance, Miro felt it so wonderfully aware of all the subtleties and delights of life and art and literature, yet also somehow apart—aesthetically rather than spiritually detached. An onlooker by temperament rather than by choice: a true anchorite, but of the library, not the desert.

The abbot took a step closer to Miro, one gnarled hand tightened on his gnarled cane. His stature was miraculous: he would have equalled Terek in height, had he stood straight. But where Terek's vitality had the faded air of some old csikós of the Pusztá, Quintus's peculiar quality was scarcely human. Unbelievably unfleshly, he looked fitter for gnomish scrawls from an Egyptian pen than life.

"The message, Miro?" The abbot prompted, a soft compulsion in his deep grey eyes.

"Y-yes, Father. Right here." Miro's hand dove into the pocket of his oversized habit, fumbling. "There were rumours in the camp last night that Bucharest had been attacked. Then an hour ago, Father, a kurier brought this—"

He produced a message cylinder and held it out. The abbot took it in his frail hand, peeled off the scrap of tape, and scrutinised it intently, as though it held a Nabokovian cryptogram.

"It's stamped with the Cistercian seal," Miro said into the silence. "From the monastery at Cârța. It seems genuine—that's definitely Father Gregor's handwriting. Jumpy handwriting is a sign of goodness, you once said—" "It's a sign of aggravation, in this case, my boy," The abbot smiled a sly smile. "Father Gregor thinks I'm the very devil

incardinate."

Miro sensed this was a joke, but wasn't sure whether to laugh. He watched the abbot's eyes travel down the page, and saw the smile fade from his lips like breath off a razor.

"What's wrong, Father?"

"Cârța..." The abbot peered closer. "Miro, Cârța was destroyed this morning by a drone strike. Gregor's on his way here with his order, he's... He's requesting sanctuary."

"Destroyed! But Father Quintus, who would want to destroy a monastery?"

With an impenetrable sigh, the abbot pushed message and cylinder into his pocket.

"Why, undoubtedly I would if I were one of the Tsarevich's generals. I would suspect it was being used."

"Used? As what, Father?"

"A dozen possibilities. An observation post. A signal station. A munitions store. A safe house for spies. A helicopter hangar."

Miro clenched his hands into tiny fists. "Tsarevich stupidity."

"No, my boy. A reasonable assumption. The only question is: why Cârța? It's the godforsakenest fleapit in all Romania. The last time they had elections there, Dracula got in for the Liberals."

"Perhaps the Eurasianists were looking for someone."

The abbot looked darkly, in the dark, at Miro. "Perhaps. No, it's more likely Herrut's men thought the monks were Western insurrectionists."

"Then they're paranoid."

"Paranoia and common sense come together as the world goes insane, Miro."

"Do you think they'll follow the monks here, Father? Will they launch an attack on us?"

Quintus passed a hand through his silvery mist of hair. "I sincerely hope not. I have no intention of dying. I have succeeded in living now for 108 years, and I intend to continue for another hundred or so." He indicated the books with a sweep of his hand. "Otherwise, where shall I find the time to do all this non-reading?"

"One hundred and—" Miro stammered. "Father, are you really—"

The abbot put a finger to his lips and crutched to the window, a smile creasing his lent-gaunt cheeks. He leaned on his cane in the Tower of Pisa position, staring over the sunset plain with a stare that could have gazed an eagle blind. Distant explosions sent odd flickers of orange light, *dämmerung*-deathly, across his rostral profile. It was the first time Miro had seen the features clearly. Actually of Irish origin, Father Quintus looked unmistakably English—but then that is the unfailing stamp of the Irish gentleman, unless he belongs, instead, to the long-upper-lipped, thick-eyebrowed, peasant-type which is its other manifestation. English, the abbot undoubtedly looked then, but English of an older day.

"We have to save them, Father."

"The books?"

"No. The monks."

"Oh... yes. The monks." The abbot sighed deeply. "Saving their lives is not the only problem."

"It is for the monks."

Father Quintus knit his white eyebrows at the feldgrau sky, but he smiled. From this vantage, Miro could still see the sun going down in gore like a bull in the arena behind the louring peaks. The mountains' great, mile-long shadows crept across the plain toward the abbey, jagged and solemn. Smoke from the camp's bone fires—like the fumes blown from a charred city—drifted before the window. The abbot coughed away the silence and said, "I'm not sure what good it will do for Gregor's men to shelter here. Except that we can all be gathered together, as prisoners are gathered in the pit."

"We've survived till now, Father. Maybe God is preserving

this abbey for a purpose.”

“Maybe. Or maybe we’re just in the eye of the storm. For ten years now, this inane war has raged all around us and destroyed every town and village within fifty miles.” Quintus stared his fill at the horizon, afire with explosions, like the meteors of a troubled heaven. “But, as Matthew said, a city seated on a mountain cannot be hidden forever. It can only be a matter of time.”

Miro joined the abbot at the window. He surveyed the twilight ripples of the Danube and noted their antiphonal response: the flashing of tinfoil scares in the hillside vineyards. As they watched, all things—clouds, hills, Danube, air—turned a dull red, then faded slowly back to grey. The floorboards quaked a little under their feet. Quintus pointed out Gregor’s Eurocopters; their landing lights were firefly darts off to the south, where a makeshift helipad had been marked on the edge of the raggle-taggle camp.

“I will give them sanctuary, Miro. What choice do I have. But we can only pray that famine—the first and last terror—will not visit our abbey.” He sighed—a rustling sound, like wandering autumn leaves. “It’s been a long war, Miro, and I’m afraid a long winter will follow.”

“Prince Alexei,” Miro bit off the name with venom, “has a lot to answer for.”

The abbot laid a hand on Miro’s shoulder, gentle as a wounded paw.

“That way, Miro, madness lies.”

Miro’s eyes flashed toward the abbot. “Why?”

“My boy, what is Alexei? A Mars in swaddling clothes. A bundle of human stupidities and compulsions held together by delusions—by what those old Viennese psychoanalysts would have called neuroses. How can he be answerable for anything? There is not enough of him. Or of Herrut, or of their entire eunuchdom of advisors.” The abbot tapped his hand against his chest. “How deep does the will of God lie? It lies in the very heart of us, Miro. Where is the will in a bundle of old bones?”

“In Alexei’s men, I suspect that the will comes from the Devil.”

“But could you strike at the Devil by dismembering the bones that conceal him?”

“You can stop him using the bones.”

“No, you defeat yourself. There is only one way. To wrestle with Satan for the shrivelled soul that animates the bones and turn its will back towards God.” The abbot cleared his throat carefully. “Mali enim nulla natura est: sed amissio boni, mali nomen accipit. Evil has no positive nature, Miro; it is merely the loss of good, as darkness is but the absence of light. Our task is not to return evil for evil, but to enlighten them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to direct our feet into the way of peace.”

Quintus lowered himself, sighing, into his chair—enough pulpital talk for one night—and sent his right hand with slow grace over his brow and hair. To Miro’s surprise, he took a pack of Sobranie Blacks from the drawer and shook one out. Fitting the cigarette to his lips, he said:

“You see the Church’s point, Miro?”

“Her point of view,” Miro answered before he could stop himself. A millimetre of flame clicked up from the abbot’s lighter. Miro averted his eyes at an oil painting on the wall—Caravaggio’s *The Calling of St. Matthew*. Was darkness really only the privation of light? Wasn’t colour itself but a degree of darkness, σκίερόν? Just as yellow was light dampened by darkness, so blue was a—

“I wonder if the Eurostate feels the same about Alexei, Father?” Miro’s words tumbled out, racing ahead of his thoughts. “I mean... as they try to bend his human soul with brainwashing, whether they really think they can guide it back to peace—or whether, by illuminating his soul, they’ll find only a darkness weakened by light. A royal blue...”

Quintus gave him a brief, dark stare.

“Answer me something, Miro. What would you do if you had Alexei in this room now?”

Miro dug his hands into his pockets and switched his gaze to the window, deference tugging against fury. The sharp metal of the moonlit Danube flashed back at him.

“What would there be to do, Father? Alexei no longer holds power.”

“Alexei was responsible for this war, was he not?”

“It takes two sides to make a war, Father.”

The abbot creaked back in his chair, walrussing smoke from his nostrils. His hand strayed vaguely to his pectoral cross as Miro’s clenched itself in his pocket.

“I know, Miro, that you blame Alexei for the death of your parents. I know that’s why you carry that knife.”

Miro shifted his weight from foot to foot, but felt equally uncomfortable on each. Like a novice reciting his catechism, he answered:

“Forgive me, Father, but that’s no longer true. I gave it to Terek. And besides, from the moment Alexei was kidnapped by the Eurostate, he became nothing more than a name for the propaganda department to use. When Alexei was kidnapped, Herrut took over, and it made no difference—not a whit of difference—to the war. Alexei, Herrut, Hetman, Darial—they’re all just cogs in a machine that drives them. The train of evil that started when our first parents sinned in Eden.”

The abbot gave a judge-like nod, steepled his fingers over his cross, and took another long drag on his cigarette.

“So you don’t want revenge?”

Miro bit his lip, then answered with deliberate hesitation, “No.”

The abbot let the word hang in the air, blew a little pale smoke at it, and said:

“I’m glad to hear you say so, Miro—even if it seems you’ve been listening to Father Gregor’s sermons.” He took the cigarette from his mouth and tapped ash in an onyx ashtray. “I heard that line about Herrut on his last broadcast. They warned me you Gen Zetas were more conservative than the Epsilons—”

The intercom on his desk buzzed. Quintus leaned forward. “Speak of the devil... yes?”

“The monks from Carta have landed, Father. Father Gregor says he wants to see you.”

“And I he. Have you shown the monks their quarters?”

“Yes, Father. We’ve offered them what was left from the Márton Day feast. Not that it was much of a feast—I’ve seen more meat on a good Friday. Ask that little zsidó apprentice of yours—”

“—Will Father Gregor be joining them?”

“Yes. He’s just sampling some of our Egri Bikavér, Father.”

“Well, ask him to step up now, and he can bring his wine up here if he wishes. We have private matters to debate. Yes. Strictly sub rosa.”

The intercom repeated the slam of an office door before Quintus silenced it.

“Drunk? Hmm... there may be some good in him after all.”

“You don’t like Father Pray, do you, Father?”

“Oh no, we are two good old enemies, Gregor and I.

Inseparable, in fact.” With the outside of his bony wrist, Quintus wiped a strand of white hair off his temple. “But I’m afraid this means we won’t have time to look at your sketches for the chapel tonight, Miro.”

“What are you going to debate with him about, Father?”

“Debate? Oh, my boy. You do not debate with Father Pray, any more than you would with the first Isaiah. No, I mean to—how should I put it—convince him at his own expense. The future of Europe, of the war, may be at stake. Weighty religious considerations, the future of the Church, of the abbey—”

“And my apprenticeship?”

Quintus wheezed what was meant to be laughter. “Yes, be honest, Miro, let us add the heaviest weight to the scales. You have been a good student, Miro, my very best. I want you to remember that, whatever happens, in the days ahead. Speaking of,” the abbot lowered his voice, as in the dark of the confessional, “I do have one last favour to ask—

“Yes, Father?”

“Take this book down to the cellars with the rest of the paintings. For safekeeping. Those of us who want to save civilisation, we had better start making up our minds which parts of it we wish to save, yes? Oh, and don’t go sneaking into Leila’s

chamber tonight." Quintus's smile grew less scrutable. "I have my reasons. Not the ones you think. You must trust me, Miro."

Miro reddened—reddened to know that he reddened.

"Father, how do you know about—"

"Monks talk, Miro. We have nothing else to do."

The intercom buzzed again. Quintus silenced it, took a record from its sleeve—Liszt's *Funerailles*—replaced it on the gramophone, and lowered the needle. The stuttering lamplight—greenish, like a faience glaze—winked and reflected from the vinyl and from the silver crucifix hanging from his neck. He poured himself a glass of *Châteauneuf du Pape*, and as he lifted the bottle, Miro caught sight of a wine-ringed photo of a boy on the desk. The boy was dressed in a sailor suit, with lank brown hair parted on the left. A bang fell over his right eye. His cheekbones were just so, his eyes dark and Lermontovian, his face frail and pale as a petulant star. Catching Miro's gaze, the abbot snapped,

"Go, Miro! Dixi!"

Miro bowed and retreated to the door, his step firm, his mind reeling. As he slipped out into the corridor, he stole one last glance at the old abbot, lost in smoke and nostalgia, as if he were hearing the carillon of a church long since sunk away, like the one in *Vineta*. Beyond his window, the bracken belt of the dark mountains sharpened against the dying sunset, and a pale violet gloam spread over the plain like ink dispersing in water. A net of mist, night's vanguard, crawled over the Danube toward *Mount Pannoniae*. Something fatal hung over the abbey tonight, Miro thought, as on that Egyptian night when the eldest-born were slain. He could sense it, as the barometer senses a change in the pressure of the air. And worst of all, it wasn't just the threat of *Herrut's bombs*...





# The Dean of Lismore's Book: A Selection of Ancient Gaelic Poetry

Translator: Thomas Maclauchlan

The author of this is Ossian, the son of Finn.

Tell us, O Patrick, what honour is ours, Do the Feine of Ireland in heaven now dwell?  
In truth I can tell thee, thou Ossian of fame, That no heaven has thy father, Oscar, or Gaul.  
Sad is the tale thou tellest me, Priest, I worshipping God while the Feine have no heaven.  
Shalt thou not fare well thyself in that city, Though ne'er should thy father, Caoilte, and Oscar be there?  
Little joy would it bring to me to sit in that city, Without Caoilte, and Oscar, as well as my father.  
Better see the face of heaven's son each day, Than all the gold on earth, were it thine to possess.  
Tell us, thou Priest of the Holy city, the tale; In return I'll recount thee the battle of Gaura.  
If the tale of that city thou desir'st, old man, No thirst, no hunger, want, reproach are there.  
Who are heaven's sons? more noble are the Feinn: Are they hard of heart? have thou mercy, Cleric;  
Unlike them are the Feine, unlike them altogether, Never on the green plain did they seek the chase.  
For thy love's sake, Patrick, forsake not the heroes, Unknown to heaven's King, bring thou in the Feinn.  
Though little room you'd take, not one of your race, Unknown to heaven's King, shall get beneath his roof.  
How different Mac Cumhail, the Feinn's noble king, All men, uninvited, might enter his great house.  
Sad is that, old man, and thy life's close so near, That thou should'st so unjustly judge of my great king.  
Better the fierce conflict of Finn and his Feinn, Than thy holy master, and thyself together.  
Mournful, poor old man, that thou should'st folly speak, Better God for a day than all of Erin's Feinn.  
Though few be my days, and my life's close near, Patrick defame not the nobles of clan Boisgne.  
Thou can'st never tell, Ossian, son to the Queen, How different your nobles from those of my Lord.  
Were even Conan living, the least of the Feinn, He would not suffer thy insolence, Cleric.  
Speak not thus, Ossian, savage are thy words, Take thee now thy rest, and guide thee by my rule.  
Did'st thou see the fight, and the noble banners, Never would'st thou think but of the glory of the Feinn.  
Ossian, Prince's son, 'twill be thy soul's great loss That thou now think'st only of the battles of the Feinn.  
Did'st thou hear the hounds, and the sounds of the hunt, Thou would'st rather be there than in the holy city.  
That is sad, old man, if the glory of the chase Be greater than all which Heaven above can yield.  
Say not so, Patrick, empty are thy words, Indeed and in truth, better Finn and the Feinn.  
By thy hand, Boisgne's son, not empty are my words, Better is one angel than Finn and the Feinn.  
Were I only now as I was at Gaura's fight, I would punish thy reproach of Erin's noble Feinn.  
Thy pride is all gone, for all thy future days, None are now left of thy band but thyself.  
Were my men in life I'd not hear thy howling, And I'd make thee to suffer in return for thy talk.  
Though all of these yet lived, and were now joined together, I'd still not speak only of the Feinn's seven bands.  
Seven times the number that thou hast of priests, Fell all in battle by Oscar alone.  
Thou'rt now in thy last days, old and senseless man, Cease now thy speaking, and come away with me; Did'st thou see the men of cowls,  
Finn's son, in Alve, Thou would'st not as thou dost reproach the men of heaven.  
No less was our great band, when we were met in Taura, Reproachful are the words thou speak'st of the great king, I will forgive thee,  
Cleric, although thou dost not tell.

# Earl the Dragon Slayer

Edward White



Edward White is an English author writing in the southern heart of the blest isle. He's more widely known as the critic and video essayist extraordinaire KingEmprPenguin on YouTube, Substack and X. All six of his books can be found on Amazon and Kobo under the name Edward White. @KingEmprPenguin on X/Twitter

## THE FOURTH CHAPTER

### The Marsh Queen

The smelly and dirty frigglewumps pulled Earl to his feet with the rope and dragged him onwards.

The bigger frigglewumps pulling the rope were anything but gentle and the smaller ones hopped around Earl cackling and shrieking with delight.

Earl tried to pull himself free of the rope and the group but the coarse twine was tightly wrapped around his arms and his neck and the leading frigglewumps had a firm grip on it. As well, whenever he tried to step away from the designated path, the smaller wretches would kick him sharply in the back of the legs and the shins.

The evil frigglewumps were taking him deeper and deeper into the marsh away from the path he was supposed to be following. The marshy ground was soaking into his trousers and boots, and it was hard going as he had to wade through it. The frigglewumps who were able to hop on and off the wet soil were not understanding and were happy to yank the rope every few seconds to make him speed up.

Sir George was nowhere to be seen. He had disappeared just before all the frigglewumps had jumped on Earl. Not knowing what to do, Earl shouted his name.

"George! Sir George! Help! Help!"

After a minute he changed his cries and began yelling for anyone to help him.

His shouts were only answered by the frigglewumps.

"Shut up man-child!" they shrieked.

On and on they went through the bog. Earl didn't know exactly where they were going but he figured they were headed somewhere in the middle of the swampy wood. He noticed the trees were coming closer together even if they were not necessarily getting thicker and he saw the mud was changing to black and grey soil. He also saw more frigglewumps, who, upon seeing him and their comrades, joined the procession. The air was soon filled with their awful merry shrieks and cackles and Earl started to feel ill with fear.

Earl didn't notice it at first, but it soon became apparent the further they travelled, the bigger the frigglewumps became. It seemed that the frigglewumps who had captured Earl were the smallest of their kind because he was surrounded by monsters ranging from below his height to half the size of his father.

Finally, the spinneys of black twisted trees became so tight and clustered that they resembled round huts which the frigglewumps apparently dwelt inside.

The ground was becoming drier and firmer under Earl's boots. Up ahead, Earl could see where he was being led.

A cluster of tall, twisted, dark-grey trees roped together into a very large spinney, resembling some horrible tower in the illustrated stories of his grandfather's storybooks.

There was a large opening in the middle of these trees and Earl could see a faint, white light dimming from inside. The frigglewumps cackling and laughter toned down a tad but they were still gleeful as they pulled and pushed him through the opening. The treehouse had appeared small from the outside but now he was inside, Earl could see that it was rather spacious.

The inside of the structure resembled a dome - a shoddily-designed, wonky and slanted dome.

The light was coming from a white flower hanging from the tree branches which had been tied together to form a roof. Never had Earl seen such a sickly-looking flower, it looked like a foxglove but not only did it have several long stamens - something foxgloves do not have - but it was also of the palest white and was drooping miserably. The light it gave was weak and lifeless. Earl had to wonder whether the marsh had sucked the colour out of the poor plant like it had the trees.

The treehouse was basically circular and he was pushed into the middle of the room and all the frigglewumps lined themselves in a semi-circle around him. There was kicking and squabbling among the frigglewumps as everyone tried to get the best places.

Eventually, the ones who captured Earl were stood closest to him, followed by the tallest frigglewumps and everyone who was shorter than them stood at the back against the walls, unable to see anything.

Earl had been made to face the back of the hollow tree. It appeared that the tree structure continued because a dreary, mud-stained red curtain was hiding another gaping opening.

One of the bigger frigglewumps approached this curtain and pulled back a small section and poked his head through it. The room fell silent.

"Oh great Marsh Queen!" he said, half-excited and half-scared. "We bring a gift!"

A raspy voice growled in response.

"I was sleeping..."

"I am sorry your bigness!" the frigglewump stammered. "It is a most good gift. You will like it!"

"For waking me, it better be a worthy gift," the voice hissed back. "Show me!"

"Yes, yes, yes it is and right away! Your bigness!" the frigglewump replied. He was still stammering but he appeared to be excited rather than fearful.

The frigglewump at the curtain gestured to three other tall frigglewumps and they moved in and started pulling back the veil... to reveal a huge frigglewump.

The marsh queen was easily the size of a small elephant and was much the same colour and had a similar-sized nose. She was dressed in a great black robe complete with a hood covering the top of her head. She had large tusk-like teeth which protruded from her lips like a boar's tusks. Her bright yellow eyes assessed Earl standing in front of her and she clapped her long-clawed hands together in approval.

"Good!" she rasped.

All the frigglewumps cackled nervously at first before breaking into happy laughter. Earl looked around for a way to escape. Then two of the nearest frigglewumps started squabbling and fighting over something.

"You!" the Marsh Queen said, pointing.

The entire room became still and silent again.

"What are you fighting over?"

One of the frigglewumps wrenched something out of the other's hands and approached the giant frigglewump queen timidly. He bowed and offered Earl's wooden sword to her.

"Oh your bigness," he said, "I give you the sword of this man-child we captured. He hit many of us with it!"

"Yes," cried another one of the small frigglewumps, "he hit me on the head with it!"

"And me too!"

"He got me in the leg!"

"My nose! He hit my nose!"

"Quiet!"

Everyone did as they were told.

With a few fingers, the Marsh Queen picked up Earl's wooden sword. She brought it close to her face and examined it.

Then with a sneer, she threw it at the frigglewump who had given it to her. He was still kneeling on the ground and it smacked him right on the head. He whimpered and shrieked before fleeing back into the crowd of frigglewumps like a sorry dog.

"Fool!" the Marsh Queen shrieked. "Toys are not worthy gifts for your queen!"

She then turned her gaze towards Earl once more and with a hideous tongue licked her lips. Earl felt his stomach twist into knots and he trembled.

"Bring me the boy," the Marsh Queen rasped.

Earl's legs sprang into action, he turned and charged

headlong into the frigglewumps blocking the entrance out of the tree structure. The frigglewumps melted apart before him and he could see the exit...

Then the frigglewumps pulled the ropes tied around him and he collapsed onto the ground. He was hoisted to his feet and pushed and pulled towards the Marsh Queen; her claws were outstretched towards him and her mouth was open wide. She had dozens of big molars behind her large canines and a small string of drool was hanging out of the corner of her mouth.

Too tired and scared to struggle any longer, Earl watched the claws and teeth of the Marsh Queen grow bigger, wider, larger, sharper...

Then there was the sound of laughter. True laughter. Not the despicable cackling Earl had grown to expect from the frigglewumps but instead genuine, amused laughter. The purest kind of laughter.

It started at the back of the tree hall and then began to spread everywhere. Earl watched in surprise as the frigglewumps around him stopped whatever they were doing and began howling with laughter. Such was the power of the laughs that the frigglewumps began clutching their stomachs and rolling on the ground.

"What is the matter with you lot?!" the Marsh Queen shrieked, looking around at her minions.

Earl heard the frigglewumps below him start to laugh. They soon dropped him and he fell onto the ground where his captors were rolling around in the dirt hollering with laughter.

"Up!" a gentle yet not weak voice whispered in his ear.

Earl saw the light starting to move in the room.

He looked up and saw the flower which had been illuminating the chamber start to float away from the stem by which it was attached. Earl then felt his bonds loosen and saw the rope wrapped round him come apart by itself.

"Up!" a loud yet familiar voice commanded.

Earl looked towards the exit of the dark tree and saw the ghost Sir George floating there.

"Come!" Sir George commanded again.

Earl leapt to his feet and jumped through, between and over the laughing frigglewumps.

"Stop it!" the Marsh Queen yelled at her subjects.

"Get him! Get the boy!"

Even if the frigglewumps had been able to cease laughing, it would have been too late because Earl was already outside the tree.

"Follow me!" Sir George said, leading the way.

They both ran past the tree in the direction the path had been leading. It looked like thick swamp and marshy ground ahead and Earl did not know how he would be able to make it across without drowning or getting trapped in the bog. But then he saw what looked like a bridge made of dark green, interwoven river reeds which appeared to be floating an inch or two above the marshes. It was straight and very narrow and appeared to lead to the other side of the bog.

Sir George began floating across the strange bridge and Earl with only a moment's hesitation jumped on it as well. He expected his feet to go straight through it and hit the wet mud beneath. However, it was firm and Earl felt joy upon discovering this. After trudging through the water-clogged soil of the marsh it felt good to stand on something firm.

He felt a renewed energy and began sprinting across the bridge as fast as his feet would carry him. The trees and wind rushed by him like eagles soaring through clouds and Earl knew that not only had he never run this fast before in his life but that he couldn't run this fast.

The bridge of reeds was somehow pushing his legs up so that he ran faster but he didn't know how it was doing this.

The mist seemed to split apart before his eyes and soon he could see green up ahead. His heart leapt for joy and somehow, he managed to run even faster towards the healthy colour ahead. Trees and bushes became visible as well as dry ground blanketed

in lush, healthy grass.

As he reached the end of the bog and the reed bridge, Earl began to worry. He was going so fast that he didn't know how to stop himself or even slow down.

Suddenly, he felt his feet lose contact with the reeds below him and he started flying through the air! He was going fast but not as fast as he should have been, considering the speed which he had been running. His heart stopped as he dived through the air and then hit the grass, rolling into it. The impact hurt but not really, Earl doubted he would have any bruises.

Before he knew it, he was back on his feet staring at the bridge he had run across. It started to unfold and collapse into the waters and mud of the bog, starting where it disappeared into the mist and finishing where it met the shore of the forest. Soon the dark green reeds had been swallowed and consumed by the mud.

"I am glad we found thee in time," said Sir George who was floating next to him.

"What happened?" Earl asked. "The frigglewumps just started laughing."

"That was us," said the voice from before.

Earl turned around but saw nothing but the forest ahead. Then, one by one, five small, floating figures popped into existence. They looked like men but they were very small, only three inches tall and barely half an inch across. They were dressed in bright colours; greens, light reds, yellows and blues and their clothes appeared to be made of silk or some other soft material. The diminutive men also had transparent dragonfly-shaped wings on their backs but they didn't appear to be using them to float above the grass. There was a slight spark or glow about them which was gentle, bright and friendly somehow, Earl thought. One of the five was holding the sickly flower from the Marsh Queen's tree.

Earl recognized the diminutive men as fairies. He had seen illustrations of them in his grandfather's books but he was still surprised to realize that they existed.

Although he shouldn't have been, after all, if frigglewumps existed, it made enough sense for fairies to be real.

"Fairies!" He gaped, somewhat rudely and unintelligently.

"Yes, we are," said one of the five who was wearing a yellow cap, "I am Feather-dancer. This is Rain-drop, Flower-lion, Fire-light and Nettle-sting."

"I'm sorry," said Earl, "I mean... nice to meet you and thank you for rescuing me. But how did you know I was trapped?"

Feather-dancer gestured to Sir George with his tiny arms.

"Sir George came searching for us and asked for our aid," he said, "we could hardly refuse."

"But how can you see him?" Earl asked. "Or hear him? The frigglewumps can't see him and neither can the people back in my village."

The fairies all looked surprised.

"I do not know," Feather-dancer replied. "I suppose the frigglewumps and the folk back at your village do not believe in knights."

"It is most strange," Sir George said, "methinks they want to see me not."

Earl nodded. In many ways, it didn't matter why Sir George was invisible to most people, nothing could be done about it. Earl flinched as he remembered something.

"My sword!" he cried. "I left it back in the bog!"

"Do not fret," Sir George said, "it was made of wood. A real sword of metal will replace it."

"Where are you journeying?" Flower-lion asked.

"We seek the dwarf blacksmith Stronghath," Sir George replied, "for I have returned to aid Earl in defeating the returning great worm."

The fairies looked at each other.

"Stronghath is on the other side of the forest," said Feather-dancer, "but you will not reach him today."

Feather-dancer pointed to the sky above, it was turning into twilight.

"The paths of the forest become difficult to follow at night," he

said, "you must rest until tomorrow.

Follow us, we will take you somewhere safe."

Sir George didn't argue and Earl was glad. After everything that had happened, he was rather tired and wouldn't mind food and then slumber.

The five fairies led them deeper into the forest on the unbeaten tracks only traversed by animals and other friendly wood-folk of the old stories and histories. They soon came to a small pool as clear as crystal and the fairies beckoned Earl to jump in briefly.

Earl did as suggested. When he came out again, he was amazed to find he was not wet in the slightest and that his clothes were completely clean of the mud he had acquired in the bog.

Earl then opened his bag and ate the food he had packed. It had been a long day and he felt much better after eating.

He, Sir George and the fairies talked for the next few hours, asking and answering questions about each other's lives and communities. Earl learnt that the fairies didn't have houses as such because the whole forest was their home and they would happily fly from one tree to the other to nest and sleep for the night. The fairies for their part were surprised to hear that Earl's neighbours never went into the forest.

"How crazy and boring your people must be!" Nettle-sting exclaimed. "Imagine not wanting to enter such a beautiful wood!"

After much talk everyone decided it was time to rest and sleep. The fairies directed Earl to a patch of especially thick yet soft moss. He lay down on it and soon fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.

## THE FIFTH CHAPTER

### The Dwarven Village

When Earl awoke the next morning, he felt a bright light shining on his face. At first he thought it was the sun but as his eyes adjusted, he saw that the source was a flower planted some feet away from him.

He quickly recognized it as the flower in the Marsh Queen's tree house. However, it no longer looked sick and pale. The light was warm and yellow rather than cold and white and it was far brighter and far more radiant. The petals of the flower, which had been closed like a daisy at night while in the bog, were wide and outstretched like an open tulip. The flower petals which had been a sickly white colour were a bright orange tinted with red around the tips, bursting with life. The stamens were now a bright yellow, wide open and bent over; they all seemed to be reaching for the forest floor.

Earl's jaw dropped open. He had never seen such a beautiful and magical blossom in all his days.

The fairies were awake too and flying nearby. They explained to him that the flower was called a sunspark and they had planted it in the middle of the night and hoped it would heal. "Sunsparks, as contradictory as it may sound, need moonlight," Fire-light explained, "it is surprising this one managed to survive in that dead tree for so long."

After so long, the fairies said they had to go find their kin and conduct important fairy business but they pointed Earl in the direction of the path and told him to follow it as soon as he found it.

Earl and Sir George thanked them for their help and then both parties parted ways. The fairies to the heart of the forest and Earl with Sir George in the direction of the woodland path.

Earl felt foolish for not taking more food with him and he felt a strong need for breakfast. Fortunately, as he continued through the trees and thick flower beds, he noticed some fruit and nut trees with low-hanging branches. He picked from these as he passed and was soon refreshed and satisfied.

As he was swallowing the last brown nut, he came upon the dirt path again. He and Sir George followed it and had an ebbing and flowing conversation concerning the types of trees and flowers around them.

As it turned out, Sir George was quite the horticulturist.

After maybe an hour or so of gentle walking through the lush environment, the trees thinned and suddenly vanished. Earl and Sir George were now outside the forest and looking upon a land of low rolling hills. The land had spinneys and clusters of trees sprinkled here and there and far away in the distance tall mountains were just visible. However, the most distinctive landmark was a village on top of a hill surrounded by a wooden palisade and cultivated corn fields. It was maybe half a mile away. Sir George pointed to the village.

"There," he said, "we shall find Stronghath."

Earl merely nodded and set out down the path towards the village which widened substantially in the open countryside.

As they drew nearer, they noticed workers in the fields. All of them were dwarves, they were half the height of men but just as broad and muscular. As they passed, the dwarf farmers looked and pointed at them and whispered amongst themselves. Earl felt quite self-conscious.

Before they were half-way to the village gate, a contingent of dwarves came out and approached them. They were dressed in coats of mail, had round helmets on their heads, were holding pikes in their hands and had swords hanging from their belts.

"Halt!" one of the dwarves commanded. Earl assumed he was the leader as he was wearing a coat of arms over his mail; two bears standing on their hindlegs, snarling at each other.

"What does a human boy and a ghost wish to do in our village?" the leader asked, eyeing Earl and Sir George suspiciously.

Earl felt uneasy but Sir George spoke boldly.

"Goldhelm," he said, "dost thou recognize me not? It is I, Sir George of Greenley. The name of the boy is Earl. We have come to the village to seek aid from the blacksmith Stronghath. The worm will soon return and the boy must face it. Heaven hath sent me to prepare him."

The leading dwarf, whom Sir George had called Goldhelm, was silent, surprise visible on his face. Then the dwarf glared at Sir George and scratched his black but greying beard methodically.

"I make no secret of my name," he said, "and it would be no small task for a hellish wraith to don the voice of my old friend like a thief covering himself with a stolen cloak. Allow me to test you."

Goldhelm looked squarely at Sir George.

"First, a little-known fact. How many days did we spend in the ruins of Siegfried?"

"We spent three days there before we realized the griffon had caughteth wind of our trap," Sir George replied.

Goldhelm nodded.

"Correct. Now a thing you confided in me. What was the name of your first love?"

"Her name was Sabra," Sir George said, "her life was cuteth short by plague."

Goldhelm was silent for a moment.

"Now finally," he said, "something I have told no one. Not even my wife. What name was I going to give my son who perished in childbirth?"

"A cunning question," said George, "thou hast six sons. None died in childbirth. But thou had a daughter who died in childbirth and aye, I know what her name was to be. I shall not say it here and break thy trust."

Goldhelm dropped his pike.

"By the Lord!" he exclaimed. "It is you! It really is you! Sir George of Greenley!"

Goldhelm stepped towards Sir George.

"Halt," said Sir George, "I am not back truly.

Only in image do I walk this earth again."

Goldhelm stopped and stepped back.

"Of course," he said.

"How I should like to spend time with thee and talk as we did in days past," Sir George said to his old friend, "but time there is not. The worm will return and the boy must be ready to meet it."

Goldhelm nodded.

"Then we shall not waste time," said Goldhelm.

"Rogerhath." He said to one of the armoured dwarves.

"Go and take the boy to Stronghath and tell him everything. He must be ready to fight as soon as possible."

The dwarf nodded and gestured for Earl to follow him. Earl looked to Sir George who nodded.

"Go," said Sir George, "I believe it best that I stay here. For my presence may well grieve those who were my friends in life."

"I think that is wise," said Goldhelm, "the living belong to earth and the dead belong to heaven and there is much emotion and distress when those who belong to one realm cross into the other."

Earl followed the dwarf Rogerhath through the gates into the village. It was a very homely village, the walls of the stone buildings were covered by flower vines and other blossoming plants. Moreover, each house had not only a front garden but also a back one where all kinds of flowers were growing. The dwarves going about the village (mainly female and child dwarves) were happily conducting business.

Earl was surprised by this. He had inferred that the dwarves would be a rather serious and suspicious lot from the wall surrounding the village and the welcoming party at its gates. However, seeing the dwarves in a happy and relaxed state improved his opinion of them.

Apart from some glances here and there, the other dwarves didn't pay Earl much heed. Rogerhath led Earl to a house at the end of the village tucked neatly into a corner of the palisade. It was a fair bit larger than the other houses and reminded Earl of a castle turret which he had seen in a history book. The garden was much bigger than that of the rest of the buildings but it did not have many flowers growing inside it. Instead, it had a large furnace, an anvil, a large barrel of water, several sturdy-looking tables and a shack which appeared to be a storage hut for coal.

It was most clearly a smithy and sat outside in a sturdy straw chair was the blacksmith, smoking a long, black, clay pipe. He was bald on top and his white beard was wispy and frizzy, and his torso was rather portly, his arms however were firm with muscle. He looked at Rogerhath and Earl with an amused glint in his eye.

"Rogerhath," he said, "you come to me with a broken axe every other day but I see you have brought me something unique today."

Rogerhath grinned.

"If you don't like my frequent visits, maybe you should make me better axes," he said.

"There is nothing wrong with the axes I give you," Stronghath responded, "but there is everything wrong with your use, your cleaning and your temper."

"I would continue the argument," said Rogerhath, "but there is little time. You must produce this boy a sword and shield. He is going to need both to kill the worm who is about to return to the village on the other side of the wood."

Stronghath whose eyes were alight with a relaxed interest suddenly burned brighter.

"The worm Sir George of Greenley almost killed?" he asked, "how did you come by this knowledge?"

"Sir George is outside the gates right now," said Rogerhath, "Goldhelm tested him and he answered true."

Sir George is the one who brought this boy to our village." Stronghath looked intently at Earl, his mind in thought.

"If that is true, we have not a second to waste," he said firmly. He stood up from his chair and turned to the open door of his house.

"Gladhatha," he called.

Everyone waited patiently and half a minute later, a female dwarf came out the door. She was dressed in a green dress and a white apron, she had greying blonde hair and bright blue eyes.

"Darling husband," she said.

"Darling wife," Stronghath replied, "I must do very important work. Forget all housework, I need you to make a hearty lunch for me, Rogerhath and this boy."

Dinner will need to be extra hearty and for three as well. Great work requires great food and stuffed guts. We'll also need

elderberry cordial, water won't be refreshing enough."

"I'll raid the larder," Gladhatha said.

She turned and walked back into the house. "Boy, Rogerhath," Stronghath said, "I'll need your help. You might want to tell your wife you'll be eating here."

"Fine by me," said Rogerhath, "but I'm disappointed with your choices. We should have beer rather than cordial."

"Beer is not conducive to a job well done," Stronghath said, "and I know you. You get very cheery on beer."

Rogerhath mumbled something and walked off, presumably, back to his home and wife. Stronghath looked at Earl.

"What is your name, boy?" he asked.

"Earl," Earl replied.

"Earl then," Stronghath said, "I need you to help me light my forge."

The two of them set to work shovelling coal into the furnace. By the time they had finished, Rogerhath arrived without his armour and spear, he still had an axe hanging from his belt, however. All three then piled kindling amongst the coal and then set light to it. Soon a fire was going and the coals were ignited. It was at this point that Gladhatha brought lunch out to them and they ate it on an outdoor picnic table.

Stronghath complimented Gladhatha for her expert timing as they had to wait for the forge to reach the right temperature. Lunch consisted of the nicest sandwiches Earl had tasted; the bread was freshly-made and the chicken inside was tender and filling. The elderberry cordial too was deliciously smooth and struck the right balance between fruitiness and sugariness.

Rogerhath ate the sandwiches with them but did not touch the cordial, instead he took out several bottles from a bag he was carrying and laid them on the table.

"You insult my wife's produce," Stronghath said in a voice which was either teasing or stern, Earl couldn't tell, "she went to great efforts to brew the cordial we are currently enjoying."

"Brew? You misuse that great word," said Rogerhath, opening one of the bottles, "anyhow, my father-in-law will be not a little irritated if I do not give him feedback on this latest concoction."

"I cannot imagine what worth your advice might be to him," Stronghath said, "you like everything he gives you."

Earl did feel a little left out during the meal. The two dwarves clearly knew each other well and he did not feel comfortable bringing a word in edgeways.

Lunch was soon finished and they got back to work. For this part of the task, Stronghath brought out a bar of steel which he had clearly prepared before and placed it in the forge. When it had heated up, he would take it to the anvil and begin to hammer it before bringing it back to the forge and heating it up once more.

He didn't need Earl and Rogerhath's help for this but he would occasionally command them to shovel more coal into the forge to keep the temperature high.

As a result of this inactivity, Rogerhath began to drink more of the beer he had brought. Rogerhath's cheeks turned redder and redder as he continued to drink and soon he was very merry and rather open to conversation. He began asking Earl questions about his village and the conversation carried on from there while Stronghath hammered in the background.

"You have no weapons?"

"No. We melted them down some years ago," Earl explained.

"But you have defences, right?" Rogerhath asked, incredulous.

"Defences for what?" Earl asked.

"For dragons or trolls of course," Rogerhath slurred the last part of the sentence, "they have been known to attack defenceless villages."

"No, I have never seen a dragon or a troll," said Earl, "no one in my village has."

Rogerhath shook his head and made some pronounced "tut tuts".

"That's why we have a wall and our weapons," Rogerhath said, "to kill dragons and trolls."

"Wait," said Earl, "has this village ever been attacked by a

dragon or a troll?"

Rogerhath paused and scratched his head. "Not that I can remember," he said.

"So, it hasn't happened?"

"Err... no."

"Then why do you have this wall? And why do you carry weapons all the time?" Earl asked.

Rogerhath scratched his beard haphazardly in drunken thought. Then the hammering noise stopped.

"Maybe our wall and swords are the reason we haven't been attacked by trolls or dragons," Stronghath said.

He walked away from the anvil with the glowing metal caught in between a pair of tongs, to the barrel filled with water. He placed the metal in there and the water hissed with plumes and billows of steam as the heat evaporated from the blacksmith's creation.

When the steam had cleared, Stronghath was holding a sword blade with his tongs.

"A wooden handle and a pommel will need to be fixed but that can be done later," he said, "come take a look."

Earl and Rogerhath stepped forwards and did as Stronghath ordered. It was a short blade, about two feet long but it was broad too, it was just over two inches wide. The edges looked as sharp as razors and the rounded point looked especially deadly.

"It will cut or stab with equal might," said Stronghath, his eyes sparkling with a modest kind of pride, "it will not fare the best against dragon scales but it will tear through the toughest of hides."

"It looks heavy," Earl said.

"It is," said Stronghath, "nothing good was ever light."

He placed the sword on a nearby table. "Now for this next work, I will need help from both you."

Stronghath got several steel bars and asked them to grab a pair of tongs and help him heat them. They all stood in front of the furnace for some time till the bars became red hot. Then they took them to the anvil and kept them in place while Stronghath hammered the metal till it moulded together into a flat plate. By the time this was done it was nightfall.

"The rest I can do myself," he said, "you can go and get some sleep. I shall be finished before morning." Rogerhath offered Earl a place at his house. Earl was only too happy to accept; he was tired from all the blacksmith work and he hadn't even done a great deal of it. Rogerhath had a small guest room in his house; it was a sparse chamber but it did contain a very comfortable bed and it was just right for a boy of Earl's size.

Although Stronghath's hammering could still be heard at the other end of the village, Earl quickly fell into a deep sleep.

## THE SIXTH CHAPTER

### The Return of the Frigglewumps

Earl awoke just after dawn, completely refreshed. This was surprising. And what was even more surprising was that he didn't feel stiff or sore at all. Was he getting stronger or was all the work from yesterday light work? His nostrils picked up the smell of meat frying and he walked out of his guest room into the kitchen and living area of Rogerhath's hut. He was sat at the table, his wife (whom Earl hadn't met the day before) was frying some bacon and eggs over the fireplace. "Flowergem," Rogerhath was saying as Earl entered, "you must tell your father that the latest brew he gave me was good. Light and hoppy, the best kind of ale."

"A month ago, you were singing the praises of the darker kind of ale," Flowergem said.

"That was good too," said Rogerhath, "your father never stops surprising me."

He turned and saw Earl. "Earl," he said, "sit at the table. We shall eat and then set off to Stronghath's forge."

The breakfast prepared by Flowergem was simple, consisting of fried eggs, meat, bread and healthy portions of cheese washed

down with mugs of milk. It was a filling meal and soon Rogerhath and Earl were out the door and walking to the blacksmith.

When they arrived, they saw Stronghath coming out of his house.

"Just in time," he said to them, "Earl. Your armaments are ready."

He led them both to the outside table and presented his handiwork. The sword was sitting in a leather sheath and was now fully complete with a round pommel and a metal cross guard. The metal plate had been hammered and crafted into a round shield and it was large enough for Earl to hide behind it if he crouched. Also on the table was a helmet with eye guards and a nose guard.

"If there were time," said Stronghath, noticing Earl's eyes on the helmet, "I would have made you a full suit but these are the essentials."

Stronghath handed Earl the sheath and he tied it around his waist. Then the dwarf passed him the shield and helmet.

"This helmet will allow you to keep your head in combat," he said, "and this shield will resist the hottest dragon flames."

Earl placed the helmet on his head and lifted the shield both felt firm and strong.

"Now there is nothing else I can give you," said Stronghath, "apart from my wishes of good luck."

Earl nodded and thanked the dwarven maker of arms before he turned to leave the village. Rogerhath offered to escort him and Earl was happy to accept.

They both walked through the village gates and saw Sir George by the edge of the path.

"Not a thousand years could maketh me forget Stronghath's craft," Sir George said, upon seeing Earl.

"Thank the forger for his work on my behalf." He said to Rogerhath.

Rogerhath nodded. "I shall do so."

Sir George then looked to Earl again. "Thou art ready and we must make haste," he said, "for the worm will return shortly."

They both said goodbye to Rogerhath who wished them the best and bid Earl to visit him again shortly. Earl said he would and then they parted ways.

It did not take long to walk through the fields and up the hill back into East Oak Wood. The trees and flowers of the forest were now almost familiar to Earl and he felt very proud of his armour and weapon. He was soon whistling and had a merry spring in his step as he continued up the path.

He didn't know for how long he had been travelling but he knew he'd travelled quite far before he heard the loud commands of an all too familiar raspy voice.

"Find it!"

Earl stopped whistling. The Marsh Queen's voice was coming from the north. He went down low and sneaked between the trees and through the bushes in the direction of her shouts. As he moved closer he heard the sound of many feet shuffling through the grass.

Earl cautiously looked around the trunk of a large oak tree. As far as the eye could see there were frigglewumps large and small crawling on their hands and knees through the grass and flowerbeds of the woods. They were tearing up flowers, quickly looking at them, before casting them aside as if they were slag.

Two dozen yards away was the bloated Marsh Queen flanked by a pair of tall frigglewumps.

"Find the flower!" she hissed to her minions.

Flower? Earl thought confused. Then he remembered the sunspark flower the fairies had rescued from the bog and how it had provided a source of light in the Marsh Queen's tree.

"They are doing all this for a flower," he whispered to Sir George.

"Creatures evil and vile hate to lose what they have taken," Sir George replied.

Earl felt a conflict within him. On the one hand he wanted to leave as the frigglewumps still scared him.

However, the sight of these wretched monsters tearing and

destroying the forest floor with their single-minded goal of finding a sunspark to take back into their disgusting marsh angered him. He wanted to put an end to them.

He stood there watching, weighing up the options in his mind and then Sir George, as if he were reading his thoughts, spoke.

"If thou cannot battle with these, thou shalt not be able to do so with the worm," he said.

"There are too many of them," Earl replied.

"They are cowards," said Sir George, "cut down the queen and they will flee back into their marsh."

There was a rustling nearby. Earl looked and saw a small frigglewump just a couple of feet away; it hadn't noticed him because its eyes were fixed on the ground below.

"Lo!" Sir George said. "Tis a small one. Son, strike it now! With its death gain courage and kill the queen."

Earl looked at Sir George, his legs were starting to shake but he nodded. Then he looked at the miserable creature in front of him and pointed his sword.

"Draw your blade back a bit," Sir George advised, "yes, like so. Aim, raise your shield too. Left leg forward. Bend slightly. Now strike!"

Earl leapt forwards and thrust his sword through the side of the frigglewump. The bog-dweller squealed like a pig before collapsing onto the ground. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and then he moved no more.

Earl pulled out his sword, it was now dripping with a near transparent liquid which was tinted brown.

He was shocked with how simple and easy his kill had been and was still coming to terms with the act.

"Turn!" Sir George commanded, breaking his trance.

Earl jumped round and saw the Marsh Queen and her guards looking at him. The queen's eyes were burning with rage.

"The boy! The boy!" she shrieked. "Kill the boy!"

The tall frigglewumps advanced. They were holding long wooden staves in their hands and a fierce fire was burning in their eyes. The closest stepped forwards and raised his stick above his head.

"Raise thy shield and charge!" Sir George cried.

Earl lifted his shield and charged at the tall frigglewump, his sword aimed at the monster's stomach.

Earl felt the stick meet the shield above his head and snap in two. Then he was in reach and he lunged forwards and his sword plunged deeply into the stomach of the frigglewump.

The frigglewump gasped as all the air was pushed out of his body. He fell back pulling himself from Earl's blade. The creature had a large hole in his stomach which was belching blood and fluids.

"On guard!" Sir George warned.

Earl turned from the frigglewump on death's door to the one still standing. The frigglewump snarled at him with crooked teeth and swung his stick at Earl's head. As quick as lightning Earl ducked and the staff swept over him. He then leapt up towards the frigglewump, his sword raised. Earl had seen the defenceless arms of his attacker as the brute made his attack and knew he would not be able to draw them back in time. Earl brought his sword down and cut off the frigglewump's right arm just where it connected with the shoulder.

The frigglewump howled as his arm flew off and hit the ground. He dropped the stick and drew back from Earl, the fire in his eyes replaced with terror. Earl took a step forwards and the creature turned and fled back in the direction of the bog, his open wound leaving a long trail of blood behind him.

"My subjects!" the Marsh Queen cried, her voice stricken with panic. "Attack him!"

Earl looked over his shoulder and saw all the frigglewumps staring at him, their eyes wide with fear.

None of them moved. Earl then looked at the Marsh Queen, her body was trembling.

"Please..." she begged.

Earl began to march towards her. "Please don't kill me..."

Earl paused.

"Please spare me." She said in a weak voice.

Earl looked at the queen, then at her guard who was spluttering blood from the mouth and then at the already dead frigglewump by the oak tree. She was pathetic-looking; maybe he had killed enough? Perhaps this would scare her and the rest of the frigglewumps to stay in their bog? Maybe mercy was the right move.

Then Sir George spoke. "Many asked her for this same mercy," he said, "but she gave it not. If she liveth, many more will beg her for this same compassion and she will not give it."

Earl's resolve returned.

He raised his sword and shield and charged at the giant frigglewump. She shrieked and lifted her clawed arms to defend her head but they did not save her, Earl's sword sliced through both and continued straight through her bloated throat.

The same scared expression was visible on the Marsh Queen's face as her head fell from her body and hit the green grass below.

Earl turned and looked at the rest of the frigglewumps. There was silence. All their eyes looked at the Marsh Queen's severed head on the ground below.

Then the forest erupted with howls, shrieks, cries and screeches as every frigglewump, tall and small, ran through the trees as fast as they could from Earl while still heading in the direction of the bog. Never had Earl seen frigglewumps hop so fast, pushing shoving anyone and everything out of their way in pure panic and fear.

Shorter frigglewumps were trampled underfoot by their larger brethren, stronger ones pushed and kicked each other in their desperation to get ahead.

The pandemonium and noise continued for a full minute and Earl watched as they rushed past him.

Then there was silence and the only frigglewumps left in the woods were either the dead or the dying.

## THE FINAL CHAPTER

### The Return of the Worm

Earl felt as if he were in a dream. He was now walking on the high path through the marsh and bog, unsure how to process what he had just done.

He had killed two frigglewumps one of whom was the Marsh Queen. Never in his life would he have guessed he could do such a thing. But he had. From his reading of history and of the tales of great warriors he'd always thought that if he did do something similar to this he'd feel a great sense of glory, achievement or pride. Yet he didn't feel any of these at all. He had a quiet sense of satisfaction but that was all and there was a mild sick feeling as well. But mostly he just felt the same. He knew he was different, that he had grown stronger, but he didn't feel different.

The walk through the bog to the other side of the wood was uneventful and mundane, but that wasn't surprising. It seemed to Earl everything he had ever done was ordinary up until the fight which had just happened twenty minutes ago. Part of him wondered whether he would be able to adapt to a more normal, ordinary life.

He managed to wrestle his thoughts and feelings away from the frigglewumps as he stepped out of the bog and into forest again. Frigglewumps were one thing but could he defeat this worm?

Fear gripped him but not as strongly as it had before. The thought of facing the ancient dragon was not quite as daunting.

"Am I ready?" He asked Sir George.

Sir George was quiet for a moment. "Thou must be ready," he said.

Earl was not sure what to think of this answer but decided not to ask again. The rest of the journey through the beautiful wood remained quiet in words but rich in the sounds of forest life.

The path seemed to become more and more familiar to Earl as he grew closer to the forest's edge and to his home. As he turned around a cluster of trees, he saw the fields where the sheep and

cows normally frolicked but there were none to be seen.

Instead, sitting in the middle of the field between East Oak and his village were clusters of people, cowering, hugging, snivelling, weeping and crying. In the distance, Earl could see several of the houses in his village burning, several more smoking and two crushed to rubble.

He felt himself tremble as he saw something large obscured by his house and his parents' apple orchard.

Despite his fear, Earl discovered he was rushing towards the villagers in the middle of the field. If the worm was where he thought it was, then the villagers were too close to be safe, they had to move!

Earl stopped when he reached them. He was the only one standing, he spotted his parents.

"Mother, father," he said.

They looked up at him from their positions of terror and despair, their eyes filled with fear and tears.

"Who are you?" his father spluttered. Earl felt cold, never had he heard his father sound so weak or so scared.

Earl took off his helmet. "It is me," he said, "it's Earl."

At this, his father stood up and hugged him tightly with shaking arms.

"My son!" he cried. "I'm glad you are safe, but I wish you had returned to a safer village!"

"What has happened?" asked Earl, looking up at the village.

"We were taking down the statue," Earl's father said, "Fisher had just struck off one of Sir George's arms with his sledgehammer, when we heard a monstrous roaring from below and that worm erupted from the ground..."

"It's not a worm!"

Earl looked from his shivering father to the interrupter. It was Mister Smidgen but Earl almost didn't recognize him. He was alone; his eyes were bloodshot and his neatly parted hair was messy and dishevelled. He was unusually still but he was on his knees just like everyone else. He was looking poisoned daggers at Earl's father, his eyes unblinking and still.

"Then what is that thing?!" Earl's mother shrieked. Her voice was that of a woman who was on the edge of breaking down into a screaming fit.

"It looks like a dragon!" Mr Baker cried with tear-stained cheeks.

"It is not a dragon!" Smidgen bellowed, silencing everyone.

"Dragons don't exist! Worms don't exist! Everyone here has had an education! There is no excuse for believing fairy stories in these enlightened times!"

"Then what is in the village?" Earl asked. "Why are you sitting here? Why are the houses destroyed? Why is everyone crying?"

Smidgen looked at Earl. His eyes as still as ever, but he began to shake violently. He was biting his lip with such force that it had started to bleed but the educator said nothing.

"Earl," said Sir George, "these people are not safe. Ask that they enter the wood and then do battle with the worm."

Earl nodded.

"Listen," he said, "until this over, I want you all to enter the wood. You will be safe..."

"We can't enter the woods!" Fisher screeched.

"Those woods are dangerous! We can't go in there!"

"You can't stay here either," said Earl impatiently, "it isn't safe."

"I know! I know!" Fisher cried, falling face down onto the ground. "I know! But... but... but we can't enter the forest either!"

Then as a whole, the villagers started wailing, man, woman and child. All agreed that they were not safe and yet they were too scared of the wood to even consider entering it. Earl understood now. They had run as far as they dared to get to safety, but they still believed East Oak to be dangerous.

"Listen!" He shouted as loud as he could.

The villagers went silent.

"You have nothing to fear!" Earl said. "The forest is safe! I've been inside it! There is nothing to..."

"Lawbreaker!" It was Mister Smidgen again. He had jumped to his feet.

"Lawbreaker!" He shouted, pointing at Earl. "You come here armed with outlawed weapons! Now you say you entered the forbidden woods! You are a criminal! Lawbreaker!"

Everyone looked at Mister Smidgen silently.

"I think him mad," said Sir George to Earl.

"Smidgen," said Earl's father standing up. "That isn't important..."

"It is!" Smidgen was screeching like a child who has lost his temper. "He... he is the reason we are out here!"

"What!?" Earl cried.

"Yes!" Smidgen shouted, half in anger but also half in relief, Earl thought. The teacher looked toward the rest of the villagers, expectantly. "Yes! He burnt down our houses and chased us out of our village and now he wants to blame it all on a fictional dragon and have us enter a dangerous forest! He wants us dead! He must be killed!"

Earl was almost dumbfounded. "I wasn't even here until a few moments ago!" he exclaimed.

Five other men, Roger the butcher, Nigel the headmaster, Laurel the barkeeper, Horace the librarian and Samuel the miller, stood up with Smidgen, they were glaring at Earl with hatred in their eyes. Earl felt his blood go cold.

"He deserves the harshest penalty: death!" Smidgen cried.

Smidgen was no longer a teacher in Earl's eye. He was now a maniac, twisted, broken and insane.

There was a roar from the locality of the village.

"Was that me?" Earl cried, looking around at the rest of the villagers. "Was that me? That is the roar of the dragon you deny exists!" He said pointing at Smidgen and his cabal.

"I hear no roar!" said Smidgen, his voice cracking. "No roar. No dragon. But I see you! Armed and thirsting for blood. You are mad! You are a maniac! You are insane! You must be stopped!"

Smidgen and the five men approached, fists raised. Earl was about to draw his sword, when ten other men stood up and gathered at his side.

"There is a dragon in that village," Earl's father said, his voice shaking, "we all saw it. You are wrong..."

Smidgen growled like a dog before hurling himself towards Earl. The rest of his group followed him but they were blocked by Earl's father and the men who hadn't lost their minds. The mad men were outnumbered two to one, but they fought hard. It was gruesome; fists, teeth, elbows, knees, nails heads, fingers, everything.

Fighters rolled around on the grass throttling and slamming each other, those who stood struck each other with wild powerful strikes. Shouts of pain, rage and anger filled the sky and the rest of the villagers added to the cacophony by shouting, screaming and yelling.

Earl's mother's nerve snapped and she began screaming louder than anyone present at the top of her lungs without pause. Earl could have almost sworn that he could hear her vocal cords starting to tear at the seams.

Earl took no part in the fight, he just stood back and felt ill.

The fight was over as quickly as it had started.

The mad men knocked and hammered into unconsciousness. Smidgen had fought the hardest and longest, his nose was broken, blood was gushing from it and his clothes were ripped and torn showing cuts and gashes. The victors were stood above their foes, they were similarly wounded but, somehow, still conscious.

Earl's father turned to him, he was less beaten up than the rest of the men, but his arm was bleeding profusely, a bite-mark just visible on his forearm.

Earl's mother was still screaming despite the efforts of several other women to shake her out of it.

Nevertheless, she was running out of breath and the pain of screaming so hard and for so long was finally taking its toll on her.

Another roar emanated from the village.

"Go into the woods," said Earl quickly, "don't wait for me."

With that, Earl put his helmet back on, drew his sword and

marched in the direction of the noise. No one, not even his father, argued or tried to stop him. Instead, everyone got up and ran in the direction of the wood, leaving the battered men behind.

"Are you ready Sir George?" Earl asked, walking towards the orchard and his house.

"I am ready!" Sir George replied, "I shall direct thine arm and thy sword as before. This time, the worm will die."

As Earl drew nearer the orchard he saw where the sheep and cows had gone. They were sprawled out on the ground or more accurately, pieces of them were.

Something large had enjoyed a feast.

Then it raised itself from behind the house of Earl's parents. The worm. It was a grey, scaly monster with a large reptilian head. It had a long snout filled with sharp, white teeth and smoke belched out of its nostrils in a steady stream. The stumps of its limbs and wings were visible on its long serpentine body as well as a tiny degenerated front leg; these were the only signs of a life once spent above ground rather than below it. The worm perceived Earl and Sir George with its deep, black, intelligent eyes.

"George," it snarled. "Thou dost return with a fodder to battle me. Thou knowest now that this village is mine. My schemes and plots have triumphed. Once I've finished with thy boy, I shall chase the rest and lord over them."

The worm snarled once more and looked at Earl. Then it began to open its maw.

"Shield up!" Sir George commanded.

Earl raised his shield and crouched behind it. He heard an outpouring of breath; the dragon fire struck and did nothing. The flames bounced around and beside the shield; Earl didn't even feel the heat.

He heard the worm shut its mouth and he lowered the shield. The dragon was raising its neck.

"Rush!" Sir George commanded.

Earl charged as the worm bared its fangs and snapped his head and neck towards him. The worm's teeth bit nothing but air and Earl was right next to the long neck of the monster. Earl struck with a cut of instinct, but his blade did nothing against the scales of the dirt-eating reptile.

"Stab under its scales!" Sir George cried, "or else find a weakness."

Earl eyes glanced over the serpentine body of the worm but he could see no weaknesses or gaps in the scales to exploit. He detected movement out of the corner of his eyes and turned his head to see the worm baring its jaws.

Covering his back with the shield, Earl ran as fast he could down the length of the worm's body. He felt the ground shake beneath him and the sound of teeth biting and snapping as the worm's attack struck the ground behind him. The worm's body was long like that of a giant snake; long, twisted, curled and slithering. Earl's plan was to run the entire length of the worm's body and find a place which looked weak enough for his sword to pierce through. He aimed some perfunctory cuts at the worm's body to test the monster's scales, but his sword bounced off every time. All the while, Earl could sense the dragon raising its head high above the ground for another strike.

Then Earl's eyes caught something. A patch of rough, worn-looking skin on the side of the slithering- lizard's body, it was not covered with tough scales. Earl realized that this had to have been one of the dragon's legs before Sir George had sliced it off.

He adjusted his course and eyed the bare patch, his sword drawn back and his legs ready to spring. He leapt forwards and lunged his sword forwards and it sank deep into the flesh of the worm.

The worm howled with pain that tore the sky and shook every building and made all the birds fly from their trees. Earl drew out the sword and hot, steaming blood began pouring onto the grass below causing the very ground to hiss with contempt. Although a tremendous stream of blood was spewing out of the wound, Earl knew he had not hit a vital spot and he continued to run down

the body of the worm looking for more weak points. As he ran, he perceived the worm's body getting thinner and smaller, before long he had reached the tail of the creature. He saw that although it was scaled, the scales were small and looked soft.

He heard the dragon open its mouth and he crouched behind his shield, saving him from the fiery breath of the worm. When the fire had stopped, he looked to see that the dragon had moved its tail three yards away from him. Undaunted, Earl charged towards it and jumped aside from the dragon's snapping maw, he reached the tail and brought his sword down on it.

Earl hacked off the tail right where it connected to the dragon's spine and the thing hit the ground and curled into a tight ball of its own accord. The worm let out a piercing scream as more of its hot blood drenched the ground. Although the monster's head could not make expressions recognizable to men, Earl could see the dragon was tired and losing vigour.

"Thou art killing it!" Sir George shouted.

"Continue as thou hast done! Slay this lizard once and for all!" Earl encouraged by both his success and Sir George's commendations, rushed around the dragon and found yet another place where it had had a powerful and mighty leg. He thrust the dwarven sword deep into the worm's hide, twisting it for extra damage. Once more the same effects, a cry of pain from the monster and an outpouring of blood onto the recoiling grass.

Earl watched as the dragon tried to raise its head for another strike at him, but the worm had lost its strength and could not continue from the great loss of blood. The worm's neck followed its head as it collapsed onto the ground with a dull thud causing the ground to tremble. Earl could hear the dragon breathing deeply and heavily with the strained difficulty found in any creature, man or beast, on the brink of death. Earl expected to hear the breathing slow before finally stopping but the deep intakes of breath continued for more than a minute. And still the blood poured unending from the worm's wounds.

"Is it going to die?" Earl asked Sir George.

"Any normal thing would hath died from these," Sir George said, indicating the wounds Earl had inflicted, "however, this is a dragon. A worm. Only when its head is separated from its body will it enter into oblivion."

Earl nodded and walked around the worm's body, making his way to its head. As he neared the front of the worm, it raised its head and turned to him. Scales fell off its head and neck, and the worm's black eyes were watering and dripping with clear liquid.

"Thou pest!" it sneered in pain, "thou wretch! Thou whelp! Thou dog! Thou fool! Dost thou think thou hast won? That thou hast tasted victory? Foolish boy! I have brethren who shall avenge me! Thou shalt not live in safety, thy children and kindred will suffer for thy transgressions! Dost thou think I serve but myself? My lord shall learn of this! Then all his servants and my fellow brothers shall be brought to bear on thyself and thy kin! Despair! For thou could have chosen to accept my lordship and to enter in servitude to the reign of my master!"

The worm looked at Earl its head unsteady. Earl looked at the worm and felt a chill as he considered the monster's words.

"Is it telling the truth?" he asked Sir George.

"Yes," Sir George replied, "but worry not. This worm knows, as I do, that his master hath neither the might nor the right to claim lordship over this realm. As too, he dost know that the realm of heaven shall destroy his master at a time pre-ordained."

The worm spat at Earl's shield and then the creature took in a tremendous breath. Earl knew what was coming next. He ducked behind his shield and then the fire breath struck. This was the hottest the dragon had ever breathed because this outlet of breath burned like hellfire. Earl could feel the pain searing across his arm holding the shield, as the metal heated from the flames.

Fortunately, this outburst was short, and the flames ended abruptly as the worm's neck and head slumped to the ground. The monster exhausted by its last act of defiance.

Earl threw away the steaming shield and his arm felt instant relief. He gripped his sword with both hands and ran towards the outstretched neck of the worm. All the hard scales had fallen off

the dragon revealing tough, worn skin that would not resist a direct sword strike. Any scales which still remained were bleached of colour and looked as soft as human fingernails.

The worm was breathing softly.

Earl raised the sword above his head and then brought it down with all his weight and might. The head was separated from the neck; no blood remained in the worm and so nothing poured from the severed head.

The dragon's breathing stopped.

There was silence yet the world was not silent. Although nothing moved and no one spoke, Earl could feel something lift from the air. The atmosphere was not so heavy, so stifling or so oppressive and he could almost hear the change taking place across the countryside. It was the strangest sense he'd ever had, and he could not figure out what was happening or at least not entirely.

Earl turned to Sir George. "We did it," said Earl.

"Nay," said Sir George, "thou did."

"Without you, I couldn't have."

"Tis true," Sir George admitted, "yet it was not I who did those strikes. Or carried that sword."

There was a bit more silence. In the distance, Earl could see the villagers coming out of the East Oak.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"That is for thee and thy kin to decide," Sir George said.

"The worm said something about its master and its brothers.

How will I prepare for them?"

"This master will be dealt with by heaven. Men have not been charged with his defeat. As for this monster's brethren, methinks thou wilt not have to deal with them thyself. Thou shalt want to build thy sons and thy brothers to face what comes next. Even when thou art gone, thine example will provide guidance. But ensure that no one forgets this, otherwise, thine example will not be there for posterity."

Earl pondered this. He didn't know how he'd make sure any of this was not forgotten. If it was possible to forget the feats of Sir George, what chance did he stand? He wanted to ask another question, but he saw Sir George's helmed head look to the sky.

"I have completed the task I was set," he said, still looking upwards to the sky. He looked back to Earl. "It is time I went home."

Sir George drew the great sword from his sheath. He lifted it up in front of him and with it, he saluted Earl. "Fare thee well and God be with you," he said, "I wish thee and thy descendants all that is best."

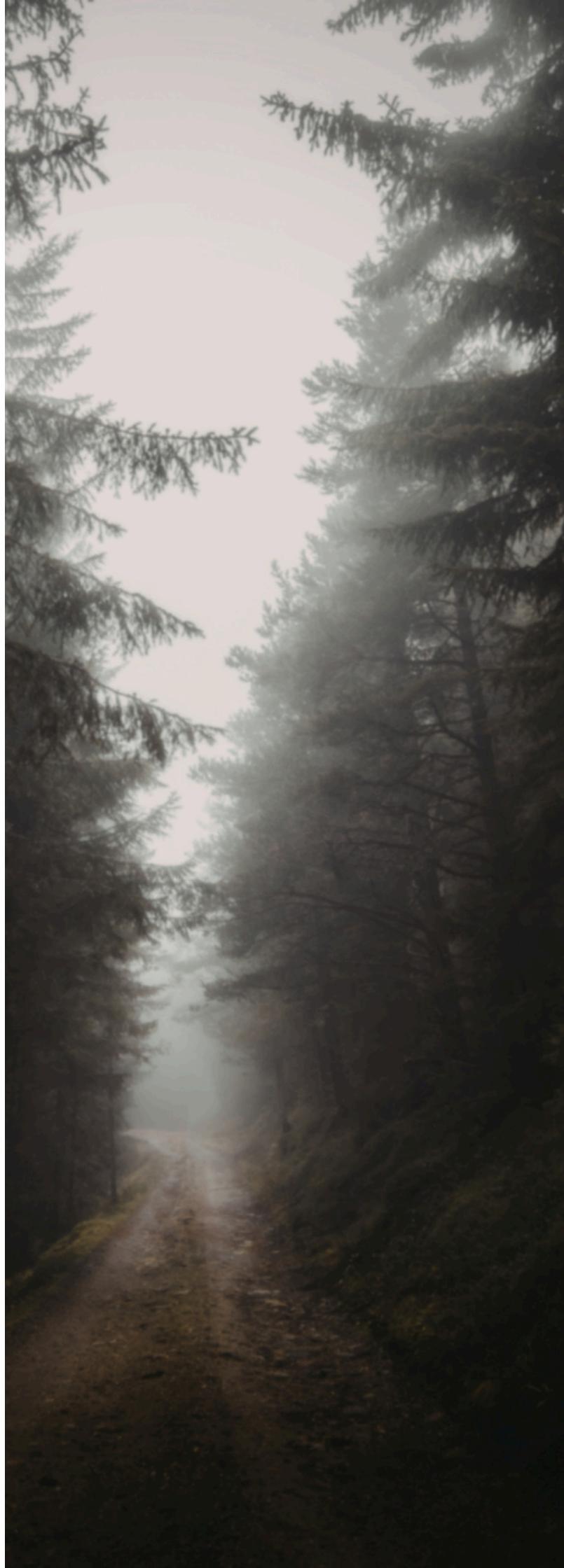
Sir George was standing there, his sword still raised one moment and then the next he was gone. Earl blinked a few times, but Sir George was gone for good.

He saw movement out of the corner of his eye. His parents were approaching him, eyes wide with shock, awe and disbelief all rolled into one. They stared first at him and then at the worm and then at him again.

Finally, Earl's father looked to where Sir George had been standing. "Was it my imagination... or was there a knight standing here?" he asked.

Earl looked at his parents, warmly surprised.

The End



# Glasgow 22<sup>nd</sup> Street

William Riverdale



Spring had left George Ramsum. He was old. He was sixty. But that wasn't anything extraordinary. People don't whisper about old age, no. They do whisper about what was left undone before old age made it undoable or unattainable. And so when the men and women around George knew that he was no longer fifty-nine, they whispered amongst themselves. Some shook their heads, some clicked their tongues, some sighed, some looked away. For George Ramsum was ripe old sixty, and he had never fallen in love.

Yes, George in all the years that he had allotted upon the earth had never courted a girl or married a woman, stolen a kiss or produced a blush. Even the male friends he kept whistled or gossiped about women, but George was always silent as the dead concerning the fairer sex. He didn't hate women. Sure he made a jest here and there about them, who didn't, and he did hold acquaintances with some exemplary ladies with whom he would talk, joke, and disagree, but he never encroached more than that or gave any hint he was open to be encroached upon. He had gone through all the springs of his life without indulging in any of the springs of his youth, and now the train had left the station without George ever getting on.

"Maybe he likes it like this."

"Well, certainly not his mother. She always mourned his abstinence, God rest her soul."

George acted like he didn't hear them and smiled politely to the folks around him. It wasn't as if he didn't think his situation peculiar. He knew just how peculiar it was. It wasn't as if he shunned romance or companionship. He wanted to, like any other man who didn't pursue being either a priest or a mendicant. He was also neither one of those rare 'eternal bachelors' that seldom are born upon the earth, those souls who truly come naked and go naked.

George wanted to fall in love. It was just that he never did. Something always held him back. And he was fishing in a shallow pool. There were plenty of women he could have reeled in. His lure was good. He came from a good family, taught in a good university, and he didn't drink or smoke or philander. He didn't have impossible standards. A salmon was as good as a sturgeon. He wasn't looking for the fish to be a secret princess or goddess, nor was he expecting any silver or golden axes along with them. So, there was bound to be a bite. But he never threw in his line. He didn't know why.

So George Ramsum knew that something was off with him. And now that he was sixty, he felt even more off, and it wasn't age that did it. He started to feel that his coat hung lopsided upon his shoulders, that the left pant of his trousers was a wee bit shorter than the right one, that his socks bunched around his shoes and when he tried to straighten them, the bunch would just shift to another spot in the sole. His flesh felt jittery like one feels when they are half-asleep and half-waking and the body becomes confused if the person is alive or dead, and his teeth felt thin as if all the saliva was sucked out of them.

All these little things scurried and crawled and fidgeted in George, until one day in the cold and grey October afternoon, George put on his lopsided coat, his uneven trousers, pushed his bunched up socked feet into his shoes, picked up his somnambulist cadaver, wetted the teeth with his tongue, and wandered down into the city.

It was cold, cold, cold. The mist from his mouth blinded him every time he breathed. The city felt like a ghost town. Hardly he saw a single soul on the street, and the fog on the windshields made it impossible to peer into the cars to see if there was even a driver driving those metal boxes as they drove past him and ahead of him. The weather was dark, the whole sky but a soggy woolen cloud that threatened rain but squeezed not a drop out of their fleece.

George wandered. He knew all the streets. He had never travelled outside of the country and rarely ever outside of the city. He went to visit his relatives when he was expected or invited.

Birthdays, marriages, funerals, and the occasional friendly

visits. He felt no inclination to go to a foreign land though many of his friends coaxed him to do so and then took their own advice and went themselves. While his friends flew away into the sky, George tramped down sidewalks and alleyways and became familiar with every crevice and corner and nook and cranny of the metropolis, knowing it like the back of his hand, knowing all the pretty spots and all the ugly sites, where they sold the best doughnut and the best burger, where they printed copies in cheap and where they cheapened out on printed books, vantages from where the entire city appeared like an ant colony and valleys were every building towered like a new Babel.

George wandered through these familiar places without a place to go or to be. He didn't even see cars anymore now. The afternoon was dying, the cloud-concealed sun slinking away over the horizon. Twilight peeked over the hills and then closed her eyes again. Evening yawned.

The city lights turned on, torches bright with blinding white against the growing dark, drawing in flies and moths to orbit around the pygmy moons that blinded out the stars and shed light on the shiny plaques that inaugurated the names of the streets that George walked under.

Hillroad...

Forest Avenue...

Kingsroad...

Three Corner Lane...

Butterfly Street...

Museum Path...

George stopped. Had he read that right? He walked back and looked up, squinting wrinkles over his eyes. He read the words on the plaque again.

"Glasgow 22nd Street," he said in wonder.

He had never heard of a 'Glasgow 22nd Street' in his life or remembered ever walking there. Furthermore, the naming convention was all wrong. There was not a single street in his city that had a designated number. And this one had twenty two. Twenty two! Where were all the others from one to twenty one? And Glasgow... There was no Glasgow street. This was not Scotland.

He read it again. Glasgow 22nd Street.

"Am I going senile?"

Up ahead he heard the sound of footsteps and low voices, but strangely enough, there were no street lights further down the road. He looked harder, and far away spied a kind of reddish-yellowish glow like that of a candle, but between over there and where he was, there was a dark abyss to cross. He decided to go and ask those footsteps and voices of the oddity of the street and see if he still possessed his bearings or or had lost them. He ventured into the darkness and heard the soft sound of running water. Again he recalled no river in the city that rolled this close to the ground, and while he was wondering if he would have to ford it, his foot hit an incline.

"A bridge?" he said, and groped, and found the parapet. The stone was smooth and cold under his palm. "A stone bridge? Where am I?"

He crossed the unseen river and came into a town square. The glow he saw had really come from a candlewick, one out of many atop the lamps littered throughout the courtyard. Another strangeness.

The square was spacious. Old and ancient buildings shot up on all sides with a white fountain completing the charming vista. Many men and women were congregating around the fountain, and they didn't seem to have noticed his sole arrival. He had started to approach them to finally figure out the mystery of Glasgow 22nd Street, but any question he had died on his lips when he finally observed that each man and woman there didn't look a day older than twenty five. Every face around him was young and ruddy, their eyes glistened like polished pearls under the glare of the lamps, their teeth ivory white and lips scarlet red, and not a single speck of grey in their raven hair. Old George Ramsum felt like a decrepit outcast who had encroached upon a

confraternity of youngsters to which he was not neither invited or welcomed to, that everybody was just too polite to ask him to leave. Blast the mystery and all the strange stuff! He was just about to turn and leave when there came the distant ringing of a church bell. Loud, ponderous yet melodious it rang, and nine times it rang and then slowly faded away. George looked up and searched the clock tower, but he couldn't find it. Instead, he saw little white objects floating down all around him. For a moment he thought it was snow. No, it came down too erratically, and if his eyes could see them better... yes, they were fluttering down, not floating down. He thought they were white confetti, but no, they were too large and too rectangular. It was only when one of those white objects pirouetted down in front of him that he finally saw what it was.

The closed flap on it was unmistakable. It was a letter. George put forth his hand to pick it up. He froze. He looked at his hand. It was not his hand. Gone were the blue, swollen serpentine vessels that coiled under the white-fuzzed steppe that was the back of his hand, and the hard stones on his knuckles were nowhere to be seen. The new hand was young, the scarce, white steppe transformed to a lush, black savanna, the vessels now buried beneath and asleep, the joints straight, the nails clean. He looked at his other hand.

He didn't recognize it either. He touched his cheeks. They weren't his cheeks. Where were the wrinkles, the sunken flesh? He touched his neck. Where was the flabby flesh; the hanging skin behind the chin? He touched his temples. Where were the creases? He grabbed now a handful of his hair. He opened his palm. Five strands, all black. He went to the fountain and looked into the waters. Gone. He was gone back. He was not a day over twenty five. He looked at his hand again, and the letter was in it. Everybody had a letter in their hand. He opened it, and there was a card. It read:

Dear George Ramsum,  
You are cordially invited to the Glasgow 22nd Street Bicentennial Ball. Just go through the gateway opposite from where you arrived at the square.

We hope to see you there. We have been waiting for you for a long time.

Sincerely,  
Cosmo

George had no idea what was happening. He felt like he was at the end of his wits. He pinched himself. He was still awake, and there was the square, the people, the fountain, and in the fountain him and not him, him looking at not him and not him looking back at him. He looked around. The mass started to leave through the gateway, the men and women with their ruddy faces and glistening eyes. George glanced one last time in the fountain. He saw the sky and the stars spilled all over it. He put the invitation inside his breastpocket and left the square behind him.

A calm dawned on George, and he started to appraise the things around him. The part of the city looked ancient yet preserved. He was surprised to find himself walking on cobblestones instead of concrete and asphalt. The tangled web of power lines weren't there to catch him if he were to fall into the sky. And it did really feel like he could fall up at any moment. He didn't speak with anybody around him and everybody else didn't either with each other or him. They all walked in a sort of religious procession, something between a Corpus Christi and a military parade. There was an unsaid solemnity in the air, but it was not mournful in the least. Instead, George felt a sort of anticipation, like a child did who waited for the mother to take away her hands and say "Peekabo!" and then both mother and child succumb to giggles. George shrugged. His coat snugged nicely on his shoulders.

Soon they arrived at what looked like the back entrance to a large estate. Up, windows flashed softly in shadow and flame, and up still, pennants flew long like dragons in an unseen wind. A valet greeted and halted them by raising a white-gloved hand. He wore a blue suit that

appeared almost purple under the lamps. He was young as well and yet not young like them, George thought. He pointed to a portal in the wall; square at the bottom and tapering at the apex filled with unlight and strange markings around the edges. The valet bid them enter, and they had to enter one by one for the door was narrow, and George found himself bowing so as not to scrape his head on the ceiling.

He didn't know how long he shuffled inside the tunnel. A few minutes? A score of years? Who knew. But then he heard the violin, and the tunnel started to lighten. He saw his shoes and his hands but not a soul was ahead or behind him. He wondered if he might have taken a wrong turn somehow somewhere in this straight passage. He feared not though, and soon he came out and forgot everything else.

He felt like he had entered a painting. It was a golden hall that he had entered, bright from the light of the chandeliers that hung down from the great vaulted dome, chandeliers that kept molten fire frozen in their glass buds and so far up that they looked like blazing flowers, so far away that maybe only angels could kindle them each night. Curtains flowed down from the walls, each a different color of the rainbow, one after another gliding down and stopping a little above the floor. At this point in time, George noticed he was on the upper floor of the estate, and a large winding staircase led down to the ballroom.

The dance floor was its own enigma for the polished marble floor was graven with what George speculated was the entire solar system, but as he further examined each of the celestial bodies, he became unsure. For one, in the center of it all was not the sun but the earth or TELLUS as it was engraved on the inside of its rim. Then, there was LUNA or the moon circling it around in its stippled band. But then there was MERCURIUS, and it too was whirling around the earth in its own cerulean thread. Then, VENUS with its ruby ring, and the Sun SOL girdled by a blazing halo, MARS with its bronze wreath, giant IUPITTER with its violet crown, and brooding SATURNUS in its silver loop. And to complete the phantasmagoric planetarium, the outermost celestial strip arrayed with legions of shining white stars against a lapis lazuli firmament, and if there was anymore to be seen, the walls of the halls hid them away.

Soon the embellished floor was filled with the young men and women, and now the men started to approach the women and took their hands and stepped aside. The men didn't even survey and the women didn't even second guess. They partnered up with ease as if they had done it before. George looked unsure about what to do next when he spied a girl tracing the path of the moon. Her back was turned to him, but as if feeling his stare, she turned and looked straight at him across the dance floor and up the staircase and right into his eyes. A wave washed over him, and he felt it did for her as well. It was as if he had always known her, as if her face had always been hidden inside his skull where his eyes couldn't find, as if she had always standing behind him all his life and whenever he would turn to catch her, she would turn with him and he would forever be spinning on his heels, but now, finally, she was standing before him. He stepped down the stairs, never breaking sight, and stood on top of earth and smiled at the moon maiden.

"I am George," he said.

"I know," she said, blushing. "I am April."

"I know," he said and held out his hand. She fell and took it.

The violin stopped. Footsteps echoed from the top of the stairs. A man stood there in a deep green suit with golden butterflies upon his lapels. He sported a pearly smile and gentle, hazel eyes.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he began. "I am your host for the night, and I go by the name of Cosmo. Welcome to all of you to the Glasgow 22nd Street Bicentennial Ball. I have been waiting for you for a long, long time. Tonight is your night. This night that you had dreamt since the beginning but forgotten all the way through." He put his hand on his breast.

"This night, this holy night, this sacred night, I bring it to you with all my heart. Now, let us waltz."

He clapped his hand once, and the sound splitted the air. The

violin came back and brought its family along: the sophisticated cello, the hulking bass, and the little violas. Fluttered in the flute and the oboe, and here the piano pulled it all together in the loveliest medley imaginable. The men and women left the encircling stars hand in hand and twirled around the wandering spheres.

George and April made their way to Venus, took a detour to Mercury, and gallivanted on the surface of the sun. They zigzagged between Jupiter and Mars and went off to greet grumpy Saturn. They teased the stars at the rim and hightailed back to mortal earth. George stood and April circled him. Then, April stood and George circled her. He caught her hand again and they swirled and swirled all over the universe, their orbits tracing their encircling paths all over the universe.

“George, where were you all my life?”

“I was getting to you,” George said, holding her close. “Took me sixty years to arrive.”

Two men strolled in the city, hands in their pockets, mist in their faces. The city was a frozen ingot exhibited under cool incandescent lights.

“It’s been two months now,” said the first man. “What do you think happened to him?”

Do you think...”

“I think he left,” replied the second.

“What, to another country? At that age?”

“Old men become more childish, don’t they say?”

“But...”

They looked at the night sky and caught sight of some of the vagrant stars through the tear in the clouds.

“Yeah, he’s out there somewhere,” agreed the first.

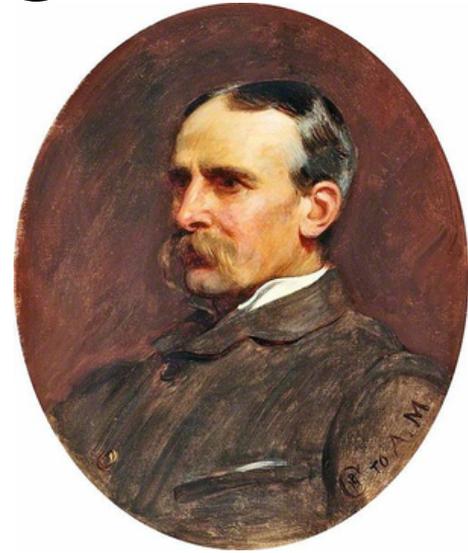
In the distance, the two men heard the tintinnabulation of a church bell.



# Featured Artist

# Breton Riviere

Briton Riviere (14 August 1840 – 20 April 1920) was a British artist of Huguenot descent, renowned primarily as an animal painter and considered the successor to Sir Edwin Landseer. Born in London, he was the son of artist William Rivière and was educated at Cheltenham College and the University of Oxford, where he earned his BA in 1866, MA in 1873, and an honorary DCL in 1891. He began exhibiting at the British Institution at age eleven and later at the Royal Academy, where he became a regular contributor starting in 1863. Initially influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites, Riviere shifted focus to animal painting around 1864. He was elected Associate of the Royal Academy in 1878 and a full Royal Academician in 1881. Riviere lived near London Zoo, which he used as a source for studying animal anatomy. He was narrowly defeated in the 1896 election for President of the Royal Academy, a position won by Edward Poynter. Though known for sentimental depictions of dogs and romanticized wild animals, Riviere also created historical and biblical paintings, often integrating animals with classical themes. His wife, Mary Alice Rivière, was a painter, and their five sons included Hugh Goldwin Rivière, who became a successful portraitist. Riviere's works are held in major institutions such as the Tate, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Chrysler Museum of Art.





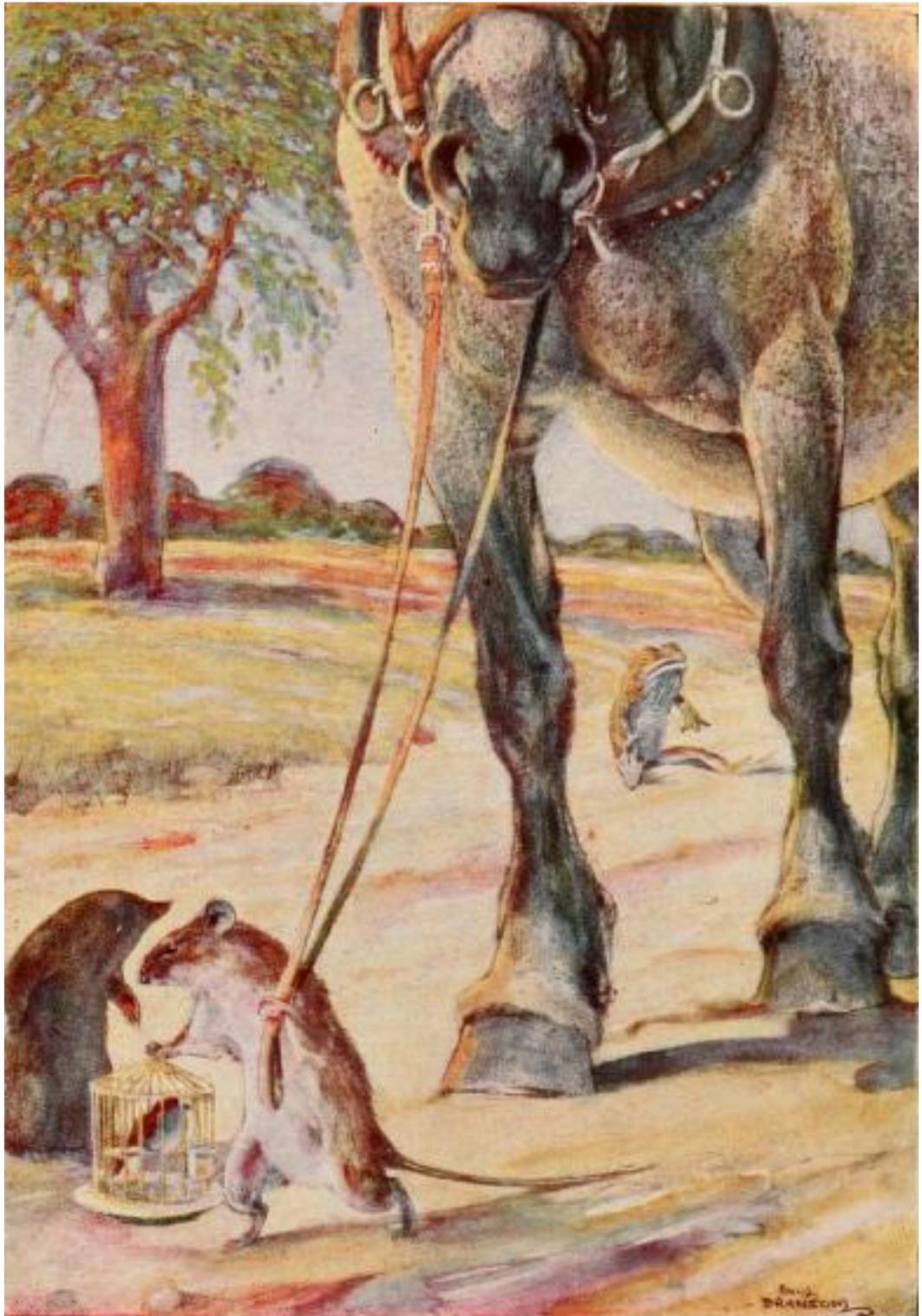


Page 25: Beyond Mans Footsteps  
Page 26: The Welcome  
Page 27: Sympathy,  
George and the Dragon  
Page 28: A Legend of St Patrick,  
Daniel in The Lions Den



# The Wind in the Willows

By Kenneth Grahame



"Come on!" he said. "We shall just have to walk it"

## II THE OPEN ROAD

"RATTY," said the Mole suddenly, one bright summer morning, "if you please, I want to ask you a favour."

The Rat was sitting on the river bank, singing a little song. He had just composed it himself, so he was very taken up with it, and would not pay proper attention to Mole or anything else. Since early morning he had been swimming in the river, in company with his friends the ducks. And when the ducks stood on their heads suddenly, as ducks will, he would dive down and tickle their necks, just under where their chins would be if ducks had chins, till they were forced to come to the surface again in a hurry, spluttering and angry and shaking their feathers at him, for it is impossible to say quite all you feel when your head is under water. At last they implored him to go away and attend to his own affairs and leave them to mind theirs. So the Rat went away, and sat on the river bank in the sun, and made up a song about them, which he called:

"DUCKS' DITTY."

All along the backwater,  
Through the rushes tall,  
Ducks are a-dabbling,  
Up tails all!  
Ducks' tails, drakes' tails,  
Yellow feet a-quiver,  
Yellow bills all out of sight  
Busy in the river!  
Slushy green undergrowth  
Where the roach swim—  
Here we keep our larder,  
Cool and full and dim.  
Everyone for what he likes!  
We like to be  
Heads down, tails up,  
Dabbling free!  
High in the blue above  
Swifts whirl and call—  
We are down a-dabbling  
Up tails all!

"I don't know that I think so very much of that little song, Rat," observed the Mole cautiously. He was no poet himself and didn't care who knew it; and he had a candid nature.

"Nor don't the ducks neither," replied the Rat cheerfully. "They say, 'Why can't fellows be allowed to do what they like when they like and as they like, instead of other fellows sitting on banks and watching them all the time and making remarks and poetry and things about them? What nonsense it all is! That's what the ducks say.'"

"So it is, so it is," said the Mole, with great heartiness.

"No, it isn't!" cried the Rat indignantly.

"Well then, it isn't, it isn't," replied the Mole soothingly. "But what I wanted to ask you was, won't you take me to call on Mr. Toad? I've heard so much about him, and I do so want to make his acquaintance."

"Why, certainly," said the good-natured Rat, jumping to his feet and dismissing poetry from his mind for the day. "Get the boat out, and we'll paddle up there at once. It's never the wrong time to call on Toad. Early or late he's always the same fellow. Always good-tempered, always glad to see you, always sorry when you go!"

"He must be a very nice animal," observed the Mole, as he got into the boat and took the sculls, while the Rat settled himself comfortably in the stern.

"He is indeed the best of animals," replied Rat. "So simple, so good-natured, and so affectionate. Perhaps he's not very clever—we can't all be geniuses; and it may be that he is both boastful and conceited. But he has got some great qualities, has Toady." Rounding a bend in the river, they came in sight of a handsome, dignified old house of mellowed red brick, with well-kept lawns reaching down to the water's edge.

"There's Toad Hall," said the Rat; "and that creek on the left, where the notice-board says, 'Private. No landing allowed,' leads to his boat-house, where we'll leave the boat. The stables are over there to the right. That's the banqueting-hall you're looking at now—very old, that is. Toad is rather rich, you know, and this is really one of the nicest houses in these parts, though we never admit as much to Toad."

They glided up the creek, and the Mole slipped his sculls as they passed into the shadow of a large boat-house. Here they saw

many handsome boats, slung from the cross beams or hauled up on a slip, but none in the water; and the place had an unused and a deserted air.

The Rat looked around him. "I understand," said he. "Boating is played out. He's tired of it, and done with it. I wonder what new fad he has taken up now? Come along and let's look him up. We shall hear all about it quite soon enough."

They disembarked, and strolled across the gay flower-decked lawns in search of Toad, whom they presently happened upon resting in a wicker garden-chair, with a pre-occupied expression of face, and a large map spread out on his knees.

"Hooray!" he cried, jumping up on seeing them, "this is splendid!" He shook the paws of both of them warmly, never waiting for an introduction to the Mole. "How kind of you!" he went on, dancing round them. "I was just going to send a boat down the river for you, Ratty, with strict orders that you were to be fetched up here at once, whatever you were doing. I want you badly—both of you. Now what will you take? Come inside and have something! You don't know how lucky it is, your turning up just now!"

"Let's sit quiet a bit, Toady!" said the Rat, throwing himself into an easy chair, while the Mole took another by the side of him and made some civil remark about Toad's "delightful residence."

"Finest house on the whole river," cried Toad boisterously. "Or anywhere else, for that matter," he could not help adding.

Here the Rat nudged the Mole. Unfortunately the Toad saw him do it, and turned very red. There was a moment's painful silence. Then Toad burst out laughing. "All right, Ratty," he said. "It's only my way, you know. And it's not such a very bad house, is it? You know you rather like it yourself. Now, look here. Let's be sensible. You are the very animals I wanted. You've got to help me. It's most important!"

"It's about your rowing, I suppose," said the Rat, with an innocent air. "You're getting on fairly well, though you splash a good bit still. With a great deal of patience, and any quantity of coaching, you may—"

"O, pooh! boating!" interrupted the Toad, in great disgust. "Silly boyish amusement. I've given that up long ago. Sheer waste of time, that's what it is. It makes me downright sorry to see you fellows, who ought to know better, spending all your energies in that aimless manner. No, I've discovered the real thing, the only genuine occupation for a lifetime. I propose to devote the remainder of mine to it, and can only regret the wasted years that lie behind me, squandered in trivialities. Come with me, dear Ratty, and your amiable friend also, if he will be so very good, just as far as the stable-yard, and you shall see what you shall see!" He led the way to the stable-yard accordingly, the Rat following with a most mistrustful expression; and there, drawn out of the coach-house into the open, they saw a gipsy caravan, shining with newness, painted a canary-yellow picked out with green, and red wheels.

"There you are!" cried the Toad, straddling and expanding himself. "There's real life for you, embodied in that little cart. The open road, the dusty highway, the heath, the common, the hedgerows, the rolling downs! Camps, villages, towns, cities! Here to-day, up and off to somewhere else to-morrow! Travel, change, interest, excitement! The whole world before you, and a horizon that's always changing! And mind! this is the very finest cart of its sort that was ever built, without any exception. Come inside and look at the arrangements. Planned 'em all myself, I did!"

The Mole was tremendously interested and excited, and followed him eagerly up the steps and into the interior of the caravan. The Rat only snorted and thrust his hands deep into his pockets, remaining where he was.

It was indeed very compact and comfortable. Little sleeping bunks—a little table that folded up against the wall—a cooking-stove, lockers, bookshelves, a bird-cage with a bird in it; and pots, pans, jugs and kettles of every size and variety.

"All complete!" said the Toad triumphantly, pulling open a locker. "You see—biscuits, potted lobster, sardines—everything you can possibly want. Soda-water here—baccy there—letter-paper, bacon, jam, cards and dominoes—you'll find," he continued, as they descended the steps again, "you'll find that nothing whatever has been forgotten, when we make our start this afternoon."

"I beg your pardon," said the Rat slowly, as he chewed a straw, "but did I overhear you say something about 'we,' and 'start,' and 'this afternoon?'"

"Now, you dear good old Ratty," said Toad, imploringly, "don't begin talking in that stiff and sniffy sort of way, because you know you've got to come. I can't possibly manage without you, so

please consider it settled, and don't argue—it's the one thing I can't stand. You surely don't mean to stick to your dull fusty old river all your life, and just live in a hole in a bank, and boat? I want to show you the world! I'm going to make an animal of you, my boy!"

"I don't care," said the Rat, doggedly. "I'm not coming, and that's flat. And I am going to stick to my old river, and live in a hole, and boat, as I've always done. And what's more, Mole's going to stick to me and do as I do, aren't you, Mole?"

"Of course I am," said the Mole, loyally. "I'll always stick to you, Rat, and what you say is to be—has got to be. All the same, it sounds as if it might have been—well, rather fun, you know!" he added, wistfully. Poor Mole! The Life Adventurous was so new a thing to him, and so thrilling; and this fresh aspect of it was so tempting; and he had fallen in love at first sight with the canary-coloured cart and all its little fitments.

The Rat saw what was passing in his mind, and wavered. He hated disappointing people, and he was fond of the Mole, and would do almost anything to oblige him. Toad was watching both of them closely.

"Come along in, and have some lunch," he said, diplomatically, "and we'll talk it over. We needn't decide anything in a hurry. Of course, I don't really care. I only want to give pleasure to you fellows. 'Live for others!' That's my motto in life."

During luncheon—which was excellent, of course, as everything at Toad Hall always was—the Toad simply let himself go. Disregarding the Rat, he proceeded to play upon the inexperienced Mole as on a harp. Naturally a voluble animal, and always mastered by his imagination, he painted the prospects of the trip and the joys of the open life and the roadside in such glowing colours that the Mole could hardly sit in his chair for excitement. Somehow, it soon seemed taken for granted by all three of them that the trip was a settled thing; and the Rat, though still unconvinced in his mind, allowed his good-nature to over-ride his personal objections. He could not bear to disappoint his two friends, who were already deep in schemes and anticipations, planning out each day's separate occupation for several weeks ahead.

When they were quite ready, the now triumphant Toad led his companions to the paddock and set them to capture the old grey horse, who, without having been consulted, and to his own extreme annoyance, had been told off by Toad for the dustiest job in this dusty expedition. He frankly preferred the paddock, and took a deal of catching. Meantime Toad packed the lockers still tighter with necessaries, and hung nosebags, nets of onions, bundles of hay, and baskets from the bottom of the cart. At last the horse was caught and harnessed, and they set off, all talking at once, each animal either trudging by the side of the cart or sitting on the shaft, as the humour took him. It was a golden afternoon. The smell of the dust they kicked up was rich and satisfying; out of thick orchards on either side the road, birds called and whistled to them cheerily; good-natured wayfarers, passing them, gave them "Good-day," or stopped to say nice things about their beautiful cart; and rabbits, sitting at their front doors in the hedgerows, held up their fore-paws, and said, "O my! O my! O my!"

Late in the evening, tired and happy and miles from home, they drew up on a remote common far from habitations, turned the horse loose to graze, and ate their simple supper sitting on the grass by the side of the cart. Toad talked big about all he was going to do in the days to come, while stars grew fuller and larger all around them, and a yellow moon, appearing suddenly and silently from nowhere in particular, came to keep them company and listen to their talk. At last they turned in to their little bunks in the cart; and Toad, kicking out his legs, sleepily said, "Well, good night, you fellows! This is the real life for a gentleman! Talk about your old river!"

"I don't talk about my river," replied the patient Rat. "You know I don't, Toad. But I think about it," he added pathetically, in a lower tone: "I think about it—all the time!"

The Mole reached out from under his blanket, felt for the Rat's paw in the darkness, and gave it a squeeze. "I'll do whatever you like, Ratty," he whispered. "Shall we run away tomorrow morning, quite early—very early—and go back to our dear old hole on the river?"

"No, no, we'll see it out," whispered back the Rat. "Thanks awfully, but I ought to stick by Toad till this trip is ended. It wouldn't be safe for him to be left to himself. It won't take very long. His fads never do. Good night!"

The end was indeed nearer than even the Rat suspected. After so much open air and excitement the Toad slept very

soundly, and no amount of shaking could rouse him out of bed next morning. So the Mole and Rat turned to, quietly and manfully, and while the Rat saw to the horse, and lit a fire, and cleaned last night's cups and platters, and got things ready for breakfast, the Mole trudged off to the nearest village, a long way off, for milk and eggs and various necessaries the Toad had, of course, forgotten to provide. The hard work had all been done, and the two animals were resting, thoroughly exhausted, by the time Toad appeared on the scene, fresh and gay, remarking what a pleasant, easy life it was they were all leading now, after the cares and worries and fatigues of housekeeping at home.

They had a pleasant ramble that day over grassy downs and along narrow by-lanes, and camped, as before, on a common, only this time the two guests took care that Toad should do his fair share of work. In consequence, when the time came for starting next morning, Toad was by no means so rapturous about the simplicity of the primitive life, and indeed attempted to resume his place in his bunk, whence he was hauled by force. Their way lay, as before, across country by narrow lanes, and it was not till the afternoon that they came out on the high-road, their first high-road; and there disaster, fleet and unforeseen, sprang out on them—disaster momentous indeed to their expedition, but simply overwhelming in its effect on the after career of Toad.

They were strolling along the high-road easily, the Mole by the horse's head, talking to him, since the horse had complained that he was being frightfully left out of it, and nobody considered him in the least; the Toad and the Water Rat walking behind the cart talking together—at least Toad was talking, and Rat was saying at intervals, "Yes, precisely; and what did you say to him?"—and thinking all the time of something very different, when far behind them they heard a faint warning hum, like the drone of a distant bee. Glancing back, they saw a small cloud of dust, with a dark centre of energy, advancing on them at incredible speed, while from out the dust a faint "Poop-poop!" wailed like an uneasy animal in pain. Hardly regarding it, they turned to resume their conversation, when in an instant (as it seemed) the peaceful scene was changed, and with a blast of wind and a whirl of sound that made them jump for the nearest ditch, it was on them! The "Poop-poop" rang with a brazen shout in their ears, they had a moment's glimpse of an interior of glittering plate-glass and rich morocco, and the magnificent motor-car, immense, breath-snatching, passionate, with its pilot tense and hugging his wheel, possessed all earth and air for the fraction of a second, flung an enveloping cloud of dust that blinded and enraptured them utterly, and then dwindled to a speck in the far distance, changed back into a droning bee once more.

The old grey horse, dreaming, as he plodded along, of his quiet paddock, in a new raw situation such as this simply abandoned himself to his natural emotions. Rearing, plunging, backing steadily, in spite of all the Mole's efforts at his head, and all the Mole's lively language directed at his better feelings, he drove the cart backwards towards the deep ditch at the side of the road. It wavered an instant—then there was a heart-rending crash—and the canary-coloured cart, their pride and their joy, lay on its side in the ditch, an irredeemable wreck.

The Rat danced up and down in the road, simply transported with passion. "You villains!" he shouted, shaking both fists, "You scoundrels, you highwaymen, you—you—road-hogs!—I'll have the law of you! I'll report you! I'll take you through all the Courts!" His home-sickness had quite slipped away from him, and for the moment he was the skipper of the canary-coloured vessel driven on a shoal by the reckless jockeying of rival mariners, and he was trying to recollect all the fine and biting things he used to say to masters of steam-launches when their wash, as they drove too near the bank, used to flood his parlour-carpet at home.

Toad sat straight down in the middle of the dusty road, his legs stretched out before him, and stared fixedly in the direction of the disappearing motor-car. He breathed short, his face wore a placid satisfied expression, and at intervals he faintly murmured "Poop-poop!"

The Mole was busy trying to quiet the horse, which he succeeded in doing after a time. Then he went to look at the cart, on its side in the ditch. It was indeed a sorry sight. Panels and windows smashed, axles hopelessly bent, one wheel off, sardine-tins scattered over the wide world, and the bird in the bird-cage sobbing pitifully and calling to be let out.

The Rat came to help him, but their united efforts were not sufficient to right the cart. "Hi! Toad!" they cried. "Come and bear a hand, can't you!"

The Toad never answered a word, or budged from his seat in the road; so they went to see what was the matter with him. They found him in a sort of a trance, a happy smile on his face, his eyes still fixed on the dusty wake of their destroyer. At intervals he was still heard to murmur "Poop-poop!"

The Rat shook him by the shoulder. "Are you coming to help us, Toad?" he demanded sternly.

"Glorious, stirring sight!" murmured Toad, never offering to move. "The poetry of motion! The real way to travel! The only way to travel! Here to-day—in next week to-morrow! Villages skipped, towns and cities jumped—always somebody else's horizon! O bliss! O poop-poop! O my! O my!"

"O stop being an ass, Toad!" cried the Mole despairingly.

"And to think I never knew!" went on the Toad in a dreamy monotone. "All those wasted years that lie behind me, I never knew, never even dreamt! But now—but now that I know, now that I fully realise! O what a flowery track lies spread before me, henceforth! What dust-clouds shall spring up behind me as I speed on my reckless way! What carts I shall fling carelessly into the ditch in the wake of my magnificent onset! Horrid little carts—common carts—canary-coloured carts!"

"What are we to do with him?" asked the Mole of the Water Rat.

"Nothing at all," replied the Rat firmly. "Because there is really nothing to be done. You see, I know him from of old. He is now possessed. He has got a new craze, and it always takes him that way, in its first stage. He'll continue like that for days now, like an animal walking in a happy dream, quite useless for all practical purposes. Never mind him. Let's go and see what there is to be done about the cart."

A careful inspection showed them that, even if they succeeded in righting it by themselves, the cart would travel no longer. The axles were in a hopeless state, and the missing wheel was shattered into pieces.

The Rat knotted the horse's reins over his back and took him by the head, carrying the bird-cage and its hysterical occupant in the other hand. "Come on!" he said grimly to the Mole. "It's five or six miles to the nearest town, and we shall just have to walk it. The sooner we make a start the better."

"But what about Toad?" asked the Mole anxiously, as they set off together. "We can't leave him here, sitting in the middle of the road by himself, in the distracted state he's in! It's not safe. Supposing another Thing were to come along?"

"O, bother Toad," said the Rat savagely; "I've done with him!"

They had not proceeded very far on their way, however, when there was a pattering of feet behind them, and Toad caught them up and thrust a paw inside the elbow of each of them; still breathing short and staring into vacancy.

"Now, look here, Toad!" said the Rat sharply: "as soon as we get to the town, you'll have to go straight to the police-station, and see if they know anything about that motor-car and who it belongs to, and lodge a complaint against it. And then you'll have to go to a blacksmith's or a wheelwright's and arrange for the cart to be fetched and mended and put to rights. It'll take time, but it's not quite a hopeless smash. Meanwhile, the Mole and I will go to an inn and find comfortable rooms where we can stay till the cart's ready, and till your nerves have recovered their shock."

"Police-station! Complaint!" murmured Toad dreamily. "Me complain of that beautiful, that heavenly vision that has been vouchsafed me! Mend the cart! I've done with carts for ever. I never want to see the cart, or to hear of it, again. O, Ratty! You can't think how obliged I am to you for consenting to come on this trip! I wouldn't have gone without you, and then I might never have seen that—that swan, that sunbeam, that thunderbolt! I might never have heard that entrancing sound, or smelt that bewitching smell! I owe it all to you, my best of friends!"

The Rat turned from him in despair. "You see what it is?" he said to the Mole, addressing him across Toad's head: "He's quite hopeless. I give it up—when we get to the town we'll go to the railway station, and with luck we may pick up a train there that'll get us back to riverbank to-night. And if ever you catch me going a-pleasuring with this provoking animal again!"—He snorted, and during the rest of that weary trudge addressed his remarks exclusively to Mole.

On reaching the town they went straight to the station and deposited Toad in the second-class waiting-room, giving a porter twopence to keep a strict eye on him. They then left the horse at an inn stable, and gave what directions they could about the cart and its contents. Eventually, a slow train having landed them at a station not very far from Toad Hall, they escorted the spell-bound, sleep-walking Toad to his door, put him inside it, and instructed his housekeeper to feed him, undress him, and put

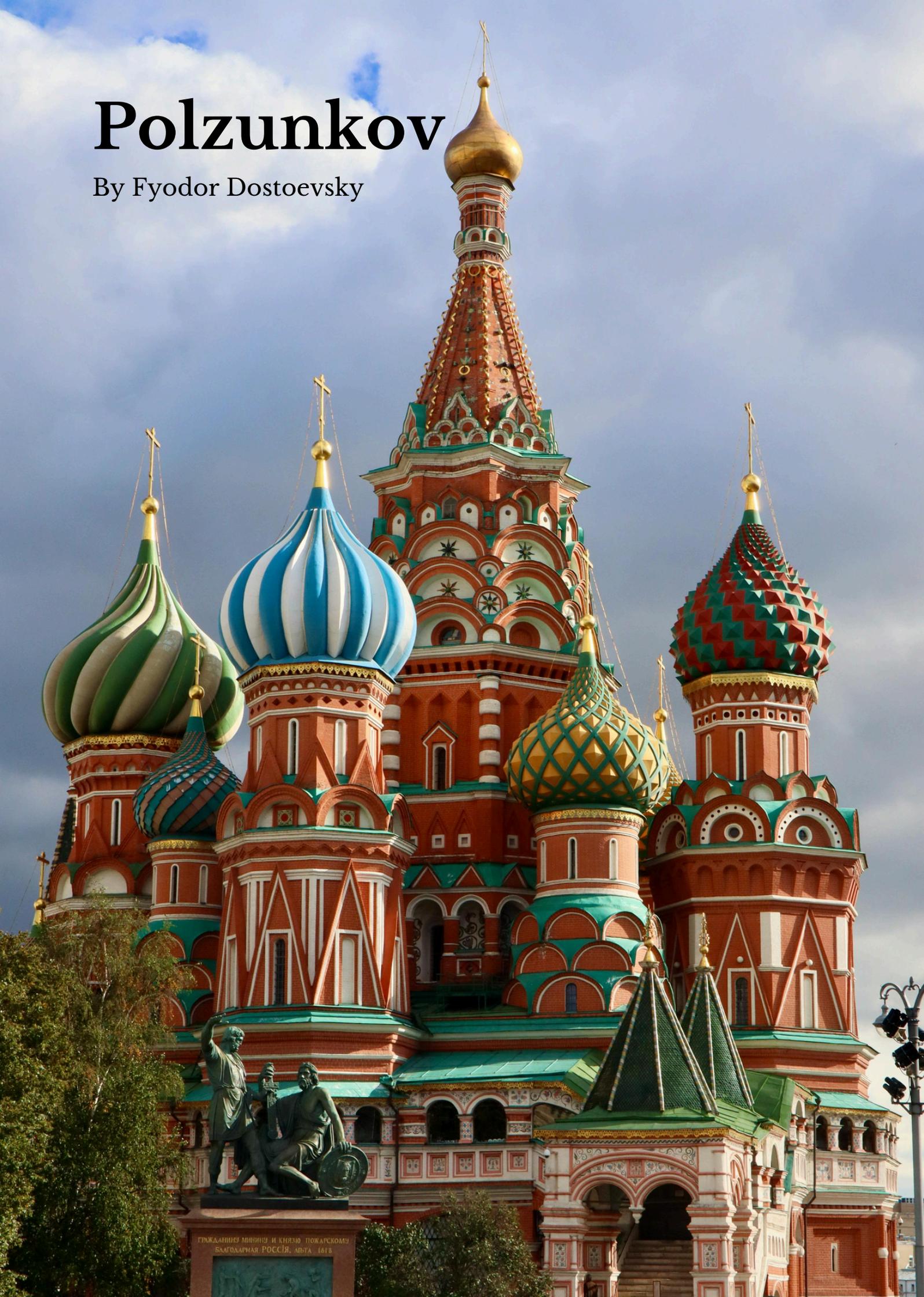
him to bed. Then they got out their boat from the boat-house, sculled down the river home, and at a very late hour sat down to supper in their own cosy riverside parlour, to the Rat's great joy and contentment.

The following evening the Mole, who had risen late and taken things very easy all day, was sitting on the bank fishing, when the Rat, who had been looking up his friends and gossiping, came strolling along to find him. "Heard the news?" he said. "There's nothing else being talked about, all along the river bank. Toad went up to Town by an early train this morning. And he has ordered a large and very expensive motor-car."



# Polzunkov

By Fyodor Dostoevsky



ГРЖДАНИНУ МИНИЧУ И КНЯЗЮ ПОЖАРСКОМУ  
БЛАГОДАРНАЯ РОССІЯ, АБГА 1818

I began to scrutinize the man closely. Even in his exterior there was something so peculiar that it compelled one, however far away one's thoughts might be, to fix one's eyes upon him and go off into the most irrepressible roar of laughter. That is what happened to me. I must observe that the little man's eyes were so mobile, or perhaps he was so sensitive to the magnetism of every eye fixed upon him, that he almost by instinct guessed that he was being observed, turned at once to the observer and anxiously analysed his expression. His continual mobility, his turning and twisting, made him look strikingly like a dancing doll. It was strange! He seemed afraid of jeers, in spite of the fact that he was almost getting his living by being a buffoon for all the world, and exposed himself to every buffet in a moral sense and even in a physical one, judging from the company he was in. Voluntary buffoons are not even to be pitied. But I noticed at once that this strange creature, this ridiculous man, was by no means a buffoon by profession. There was still something gentlemanly in him. His very uneasiness, his continual apprehensiveness about himself, were actually a testimony in his favour. It seemed to me that his desire to be obliging was due more to kindness of heart than to mercenary considerations. He readily allowed them to laugh their loudest at him and in the most unseemly way, to his face, but at the same time—and I am ready to take my oath on it—his heart ached and was sore at the thought that his listeners were so caddishly brutal as to be capable of laughing, not at anything said or done, but at him, at his whole being, at his heart, at his head, at his appearance, at his whole body, flesh and blood. I am convinced that he felt at that moment all the foolishness of his position; but the protest died away in his heart at once, though it invariably sprang up again in the most heroic way. I am convinced that all this was due to nothing else but a kind heart, and not to fear of the inconvenience of being kicked out and being unable to borrow money from some one. This gentleman was for ever borrowing money, that is, he asked for alms in that form, when after playing the fool and entertaining them at his expense he felt in a certain sense entitled to borrow money from them. But, good heavens! what a business the borrowing was! And with what a countenance he asked for the loan! I could not have imagined that on such a small space as the wrinkled, angular face of that little man room could be found, at one and the same time, for so many different grimaces, for such strange, variously characteristic shades of feeling, such absolutely killing expressions. Everything was there—shame and an assumption of insolence, and vexation at the sudden flushing of his face, and anger and fear of failure, and entreaty to be forgiven for having dared to pester, and a sense of his own dignity, and a still greater sense of his own abjectness—all this passed over his face like lightning. For six whole years he had struggled along in God's world in this way, and so far had been unable to take up a fitting attitude at the interesting moment of borrowing money! I need not say that he never could grow callous and completely abject. His heart was too sensitive, too passionate! I will say more, indeed: in my opinion, he was one of the most honest and honourable men in the world, but with a little weakness: of being ready to do anything abject at any one's bidding, good-naturedly and disinterestedly, simply to oblige a fellow-creature. In short, he was what is called "a rag" in the fullest sense of the word. The most absurd thing was, that he was dressed like any one else, neither worse nor better, tidily, even with a certain elaborateness, and actually had pretensions to respectability and personal dignity. This external equality and internal inequality, his uneasiness about himself and at the same time his continual self-depreciation—all this was strikingly incongruous and provocative of laughter and pity. If he had been convinced in his heart (and in spite of his experience it did happen to him at moments to believe this) that his audience were the most good-natured people in the world, who were simply laughing at something amusing, and not at the sacrifice of his personal dignity, he would most readily have taken off his coat, put it on wrong side outwards, and have walked about the streets in that attire for the diversion of others and his own gratification. But equality he could never anyhow attain. Another trait: the queer fellow was proud, and even, by fits and starts, when it was not too risky, generous. It was worth seeing and hearing how he could sometimes, not sparing himself, consequently with pluck, almost with heroism, dispose of one of his patrons who had infuriated him to madness. But that was at moments.... In short, he was a martyr in the fullest sense of the word, but the most useless and consequently the most comic martyr.

There was a general discussion going on among the guests. All at once I saw our queer friend jump upon his chair, and call out at

the top of his voice, anxious for the exclusive attention of the company.

"Listen," the master of the house whispered to me. "He sometimes tells the most curious stories.... Does he interest you?"

I nodded and squeezed myself into the group. The sight of a well-dressed gentleman jumping upon his chair and shouting at the top of his voice did, in fact, draw the attention of all. Many who did not know the queer fellow looked at one another in perplexity, the others roared with laughter.

"I knew Fedosey Nikolaitch. I ought to know Fedosey Nikolaitch better than any one!" cried the queer fellow from his elevation. "Gentlemen, allow me to tell you something. I can tell you a good story about Fedosey Nikolaitch! I know a story—exquisite!"

"Tell it, Osip Mihalitch, tell it."

"Tell it."

"Listen."

"Listen, listen."

"I begin; but, gentlemen, this is a peculiar story...."

"Very good, very good."

"It's a comic story."

"Very good, excellent, splendid. Get on!"

"It is an episode in the private life of your humble...."

"But why do you trouble yourself to announce that it's comic?"

"And even somewhat tragic!"

"Eh???"

"In short, the story which it will afford you all pleasure to hear me now relate, gentlemen—the story, in consequence of which I have come into company so interesting and profitable...."

"No puns!"

"This story."

"In short the story—make haste and finish the introduction. The story, which has its value," a fair-haired young man with moustaches pronounced in a husky voice, dropping his hand into his coat pocket and, as though by chance, pulling out a purse instead of his handkerchief.

"The story, my dear sirs, after which I should like to see many of you in my place. And, finally, the story, in consequence of which I have not married."

"Married! A wife! Polzunkov tried to get married!!!"

"I confess I should like to see Madame Polzunkov."

"Allow me to inquire the name of the would-be Madame Polzunkov," piped a youth, making his way up to the storyteller.

"And so for the first chapter, gentlemen. It was just six years ago, in spring, the thirty-first of March—note the date, gentlemen—on the eve...."

"Of the first of April!" cried a young man with ringlets.

"You are extraordinarily quick at guessing. It was evening.

Twilight was gathering over the district town of N., the moon was about to float out ... everything in proper style, in fact. And so in the very late twilight I, too, floated out of my poor lodging on the sly—after taking leave of my restricted granny, now dead. Excuse me, gentlemen, for making use of such a fashionable expression, which I heard for the last time from Nikolay Nikolaitch. But my granny was indeed restricted: she was blind, dumb, deaf, stupid—everything you please.... I confess I was in a tremor, I was prepared for great deeds; my heart was beating like a kitten's when some bony hand clutches it by the scruff of the neck."

"Excuse me, Monsieur Polzunkov."

"What do you want?"

"Tell it more simply; don't over-exert yourself, please!"

"All right," said Osip Mihalitch, a little taken aback. "I went into the house of Fedosey Nikolaitch (the house that he had bought). Fedosey Nikolaitch, as you know, is not a mere colleague, but the full-blown head of a department. I was announced, and was at once shown into the study. I can see it now; the room was dark, almost dark, but candles were not brought. Behold, Fedosey Nikolaitch walks in. There he and I were left in the darkness...."

"Whatever happened to you?" asked an officer.

"What do you suppose?" asked Polzunkov, turning promptly, with a convulsively working face, to the young man with ringlets. "Well, gentlemen, a strange circumstance occurred, though indeed there was nothing strange in it: it was what is called an everyday affair—I simply took out of my pocket a roll of paper ... and he a roll of paper."

"Paper notes?"

"Paper notes; and we exchanged."

"I don't mind betting that there's a flavour of bribery about it," observed a respectably dressed, closely cropped young gentleman.

"Bribery!" Polzunkov caught him up.

"Oh, may I be a Liberal, Such as many I have seen!"

If you, too, when it is your lot to serve in the provinces, do not warm your hands at your country's hearth.... For as an author said: 'Even the smoke of our native land is sweet to us.' She is our Mother, gentlemen, our Mother Russia; we are her babes, and so we suck her!"

There was a roar of laughter.

"Only would you believe it, gentlemen, I have never taken bribes!" said Polzunkov, looking round at the whole company distrustfully.

A prolonged burst of Homeric laughter drowned Polzunkov's words in guffaws.

"It really is so, gentlemen...."

But here he stopped, still looking round at every one with a strange expression of face; perhaps—who knows?—at that moment the thought came into his mind that he was more honest than many of all that honourable company.... Anyway, the serious expression of his face did not pass away till the general merriment was quite over.

"And so," Polzunkov began again when all was still, "though I never did take bribes, yet that time I transgressed; I put in my pocket a bribe ... from a bribe-taker ... that is, there were certain papers in my hands which, if I had cared to send to a certain person, it would have gone ill with Fedosey Nikolaitch."

"So then he bought them from you?"

"He did."

"Did he give much?"

"He gave as much as many a man nowadays would sell his conscience for complete, with all its variations ... if only he could get anything for it. But I felt as though I were scalded when I put the money in my pocket. I really don't understand what always comes over me, gentlemen—but I was more dead than alive, my lips twitched and my legs trembled; well, I was to blame, to blame, entirely to blame. I was utterly conscience-stricken; I was ready to beg Fedosey Nikolaitch's forgiveness."

"Well, what did he do—did he forgive you?"

"But I didn't ask his forgiveness.... I only mean that that is how I felt. Then I have a sensitive heart, you know. I saw he was looking me straight in the face. 'Have you no fear of God, Osip Mihailitch?' said he. Well, what could I do? From a feeling of propriety I put my head on one side and I flung up my hands. 'In what way,' said I, 'have I no fear of God, Fedosey Nikolaitch?' But I just said that from a feeling of propriety.... I was ready to sink into the earth. 'After being so long a friend of our family, after being, I may say, like a son—and who knows what Heaven had in store for us, Osip Mihailitch?—and all of a sudden to inform against me—to think of that now!... What am I to think of mankind after that, Osip Mihailitch?' Yes, gentlemen, he did read me a lecture! 'Come,' he said, 'you tell me what I am to think of mankind after that, Osip Mihailitch.' 'What is he to think?' I thought; and do you know, there was a lump in my throat, and my voice was quivering, and knowing my hateful weakness, I snatched up my hat. 'Where are you off to, Osip Mihailitch? Surely on the eve of such a day you cannot bear malice against me? What wrong have I done you?...' 'Fedosey Nikolaitch, I said, 'Fedosey Nikolaitch....' In fact, I melted, gentlemen, I melted like a sugar-stick. And the roll of notes that was lying in my pocket, that, too, seemed screaming out: 'You ungrateful brigand, you accursed thief!' It seemed to weigh a hundredweight ... (if only it had weighed a hundredweight!).... 'I see,' says Fedosey Nikolaitch, 'I see your penitence ... you know to-morrow....' 'St. Mary of Egypt's day....' 'Well, don't weep,' said Fedosey Nikolaitch, 'that's enough: you've erred, and you are penitent! Come along! Maybe I may succeed in bringing you back again into the true path,' says he ... 'maybe, my modest Penates' (yes, Penates, I remember he used that expression, the rascal) 'will warm,' says he, 'your harden ... I will not say hardened, but erring heart....' He took me by the arm, gentlemen, and led me to his family circle. A cold shiver ran down my back; I shuddered! I thought with what eyes shall I present myself—you must know, gentlemen ... eh, what shall I say?—a delicate position had arisen here."

"Not Madame Polzunkov?"

"Marya Fedosyevna, only she was not destined, you know, to bear the name you have given her; she did not attain that honour. Fedosey Nikolaitch was right, you see, when he said that I was almost looked upon as a son in the house; it had been so, indeed, six months before, when a certain retired junker called Mihailo Maximitch Dvigailov, was still living. But by God's will he died, and he put off settling his affairs till death settled his business for him."

"Ough!"

"Well, never mind, gentlemen, forgive me, it was a slip of the tongue. It's a bad pun, but it doesn't matter it's being bad—what happened was far worse, when I was left, so to say, with nothing in prospect but a bullet through the brain, for that junker, though he would not admit me into his house (he lived in grand style, for he had always known how to feather his nest), yet perhaps correctly he believed me to be his son."

"Aha!"

"Yes, that was how it was! So they began to cold-shoulder me at Fedosey Nikolaitch's. I noticed things, I kept quiet; but all at once, unluckily for me (or perhaps luckily!), a cavalry officer galloped into our little town like snow on our head. His business—buying horses for the army—was light and active, in cavalry style, but he settled himself solidly at Fedosey Nikolaitch's, as though he were laying siege to it! I approached the subject in a roundabout way, as my nasty habit is; I said one thing and another, asking him what I had done to be treated so, saying that I was almost like a son to him, and when might I expect him to behave more like a father.... Well, he began answering me. And when he begins to speak you are in for a regular epic in twelve cantos, and all you can do is to listen, lick your lips and throw up your hands in delight. And not a ha'p'orth of sense, at least there's no making out the sense. You stand puzzled like a fool—he puts you in a fog, he twists about like an eel and wriggles away from you. It's a special gift, a real gift—it's enough to frighten people even if it is no concern of theirs. I tried one thing and another, and went hither and thither. I took the lady songs and presented her with sweets and thought of witty things to say to her. I tried sighing and groaning. 'My heart aches,' I said, 'it aches from love.' And I went in for tears and secret explanations. Man is foolish, you know.... I never reminded myself that I was thirty ... not a bit of it! I tried all my arts. It was no go. It was a failure, and I gained nothing but jeers and gibes. I was indignant, I was choking with anger. I slunk off and would not set foot in the house. I thought and thought and made up my mind to denounce him. Well, of course, it was a shabby thing—I meant to give away a friend, I confess. I had heaps of material and splendid material—a grand case. It brought me fifteen hundred roubles when I changed it and my report on it for bank notes!"

"Ah, so that was the bribe!"

"Yes, sir, that was the bribe—and it was a bribe-taker who had to pay it—and I didn't do wrong, I can assure you! Well, now I will go on: he drew me, if you will kindly remember, more dead than alive into the room where they were having tea. They all met me, seeming as it were offended, that is, not exactly offended, but hurt—so hurt that it was simply.... They seemed shattered, absolutely shattered, and at the same time there was a look of becoming dignity on their faces, a gravity in their expression, something fatherly, parental ... the prodigal son had come back to them—that's what it had come to! They made me sit down to tea, but there was no need to do that: I felt as though a samovar was toiling in my bosom and my feet were like ice. I was humbled, I was cowed. Marya Fominishna, his wife, addressed me familiarly from the first word.

"How is it you have grown so thin, my boy?"

"I've not been very well, Marya Fominishna," I said. My wretched voice shook.

"And then quite suddenly—she must have been waiting for a chance to get a dig at me, the old snake—she said—

"I suppose your conscience felt ill at ease, Osip Mihailitch, my dear! Our fatherly hospitality was a reproach to you! You have been punished for the tears I have shed."

"Yes, upon my word, she really said that—she had the conscience to say it. Why, that was nothing to her, she was a terror! She did nothing but sit there and pour out tea. But if you were in the market, my darling, I thought you'd shout louder than any fishwife there.... That's the kind of woman she was. And then, to my undoing, the daughter, Marya Fedosyevna, came in, in all her innocence, a little pale and her eyes red as though she had been weeping. I was bowled over on the spot like a fool. But it turned out afterwards that the tears were a tribute to the cavalry officer. He had made tracks for home and taken his hook for good and all; for you know it was high time for him to be off—I may as well mention the fact here; not that his leave was up precisely, but you see.... It was only later that the loving parents grasped the position and had found out all that had happened.... What could they do? They hushed their trouble—an addition to the family!"

"Well, I could not help it—as soon as I looked at her I was done for; I stole a glance at my hat, I wanted to get up and make off. But there was no chance of that, they took away my hat.... I must

confess, I did think of getting off without it. 'Well!' I thought—but no, they latched the doors. There followed friendly jokes, winking, little airs and graces. I was overcome with embarrassment, said something stupid, talked nonsense, about love. My charmer sat down to the piano and with an air of wounded feeling sang the song about the hussar who leaned upon the sword—that finished me off!

"'Well,' said Fedosey Nikolaitch, 'all is forgotten, come to my arms!'

"I fell just as I was, with my face on his waistcoat.

"My benefactor! You are a father to me!' said I. And I shed floods of hot tears. Lord, have mercy on us, what a to-do there was! He cried, his good lady cried, Mashenka cried ... there was a flaxen-headed creature there, she cried too.... That wasn't enough: the younger children crept out of all the corners (the Lord had filled their quiver full) and they howled too.... Such tears, such emotion, such joy! They found their prodigal, it was like a soldier's return to his home. Then followed refreshments, we played forfeits, and 'I have a pain'—'Where is it?'—'In my heart'—'Who gave it you?' My charmer blushed. The old man and I had some punch—they won me over and did for me completely.

"I returned to my grandmother with my head in a whirl. I was laughing all the way home; for full two hours I paced up and down our little room. I waked up my old granny and told her of my happiness.

"But did he give you any money, the brigand?'

"He did, granny, he did, my dear—luck has come to us all of a heap: we've only to open our hand and take it.'

"I waked up Sofron.

"Sofron, I said, 'take off my boots.'

"Sofron pulled off my boots.

"Come, Sofron, congratulate me now, give me a kiss! I am going to get married, my lad, I am going to get married. You can get jolly drunk to-morrow, you can have a spree, my dear soul—your master is getting married.'

"My heart was full of jokes and laughter. I was beginning to drop off to sleep, but something made me get up again. I sat in thought: to-morrow is the first of April, a bright and playful day—what should I do? And I thought of something. Why, gentlemen, I got out of bed, lighted a candle, and sat down to the writing-table just as I was. I was in a fever of excitement, quite carried away—you know, gentlemen, what it is when a man is quite carried away? I wallowed joyfully in the mud, my dear friends. You see what I am like; they take something from you, and you give them something else as well and say, 'Take that, too.' They strike you on the cheek and in your joy you offer them your whole back. Then they try to lure you like a dog with a bun, and you embrace them with your foolish paws and fall to kissing them with all your heart and soul. Why, see what I am doing now, gentlemen! You are laughing and whispering—I see it! After I have told you all my story you will begin to turn me into ridicule, you will begin to attack me, but yet I go on talking and talking and talking! And who tells me to? Who drives me to do it? Who is standing behind my back whispering to me, 'Speak, speak and tell them?' And yet I do talk, I go on telling you, I try to please you as though you were my brothers, all my dearest friends.... Ech!" The laughter which had sprung up by degrees on all sides completely drowned at last the voice of the speaker, who really seemed worked up into a sort of ecstasy. He paused, for several minutes his eyes strayed about the company, then suddenly, as though carried away by a whirlwind, he waved his hand, burst out laughing himself, as though he really found his position amusing, and fell to telling his story again.

"I scarcely slept all night, gentlemen. I was scribbling all night: you see, I thought of a trick. Ech, gentlemen, the very thought of it makes me ashamed. It wouldn't have been so bad if it all had been done at night—I might have been drunk, blundered, been silly and talked nonsense—but not a bit of it! I woke up in the morning as soon as it was light, I hadn't slept more than an hour or two, and was in the same mind. I dressed, I washed, I curled and pomaded my hair, put on my new dress coat and went straight off to spend the holiday with Fedosey Nikolaitch, and I kept the joke I had written in my hat. He met me again with open arms, and invited me again to his fatherly waistcoat. But I assumed an air of dignity. I had the joke I thought of the night before in my mind. I drew a step back.

"No, Fedosey Nikolaitch, but will you please read this letter,' and I gave it him together with my daily report. And do you know what was in it? Why, 'for such and such reasons the aforesaid Osip Mihalitch asks to be discharged,' and under my petition I signed

my full rank! Just think what a notion! Good Lord, it was the cleverest thing I could think of! As to-day was the first of April, I was pretending, for the sake of a joke, that my resentment was not over, that I had changed my mind in the night and was grumpy, and more offended than ever, as though to say, 'My dear benefactor, I don't want to know you nor your daughter either. I put the money in my pocket yesterday, so I am secure—so here's my petition for a transfer to be discharged. I don't care to serve under such a chief as Fedosey Nikolaitch. I want to go into a different office and then, maybe, I'll inform.' I pretended to be a regular scoundrel, I wanted to frighten them. And a nice way of frightening them, wasn't it? A pretty thing, gentlemen, wasn't it? You see, my heart had grown tender towards them since the day before, so I thought I would have a little joke at the family—I would tease the fatherly heart of Fedosey Nikolaitch.

"As soon as he took my letter and opened it, I saw his whole countenance change.

"What's the meaning of this, Osip Mihalitch?'

"And like a little fool I said—

"The first of April! Many happy returns of the day, Fedosey Nikolaitch!' just like a silly school-boy who hides behind his grandmother's arm-chair and then shouts 'oof' into her ear suddenly at the top of his voice, meaning to frighten her. Yes ... yes, I feel quite ashamed to talk about it, gentlemen! No, I won't tell you."

"Nonsense! What happened then?'

"Nonsense, nonsense! Tell us! Yes, do," rose on all sides.

"There was an outcry and a hullabaloo, my dear friends! Such exclamations of surprise! And 'you mischievous fellow, you naughty man,' and what a fright I had given them—and all so sweet that I felt ashamed and wondered how such a holy place could be profaned by a sinner like me.

"Well, my dear boy,' piped the mamma, 'you gave me such a fright that my legs are all of a tremble still, I can hardly stand on my feet! I ran to Masha as though I were crazy: "Mashenka," I said, "what will become of us! See how your friend has turned out!" and I was unjust to you, my dear boy. You must forgive an old woman like me, I was taken in! Well, I thought, when he got home last night, he got home late, he began thinking and perhaps he fancied that we sent for him on purpose, yesterday, that we wanted to get hold of him. I turned cold at the thought! Give over, Mashenka, don't go on winking at me—Osip Mihalitch isn't a stranger! I am your mother, I am not likely to say any harm! Thank God, I am not twenty, but turned forty-five.'

"Well, gentlemen, I almost flopped at her feet on the spot. Again there were tears, again there were kisses. Jokes began. Fedosey Nikolaitch, too, thought he would make April fools of us. He told us the fiery bird had flown up with a letter in her diamond beak! He tried to take us in, too—didn't we laugh? weren't we touched? Foo! I feel ashamed to talk about it.

"Well, my good friends, the end is not far off now. One day passed, two, three, a week; I was regularly engaged to her. I should think so! The wedding rings were ordered, the day was fixed, only they did not want to make it public for a time—they wanted to wait for the Inspector's visit to be over. I was all impatience for the Inspector's arrival—my happiness depended upon him. I was in a hurry to get his visit over. And in the excitement and rejoicing Fedosey Nikolaitch threw all the work upon me: writing up the accounts, making up the reports, checking the books, balancing the totals. I found things in terrible disorder—everything had been neglected, there were muddles and irregularities everywhere. Well, I thought, I must do my best for my father-in-law! And he was ailing all the time, he was taken ill, it appears; he seemed to get worse day by day. And, indeed, I grew as thin as a rake myself, I was afraid I would break down. However, I finished the work grandly. I got things straight for him in time.

"Suddenly they sent a messenger for me. I ran headlong—what could it be? I saw my Fedosey Nikolaitch, his head bandaged up in a vinegar compress, frowning, sighing, and moaning.

"My dear boy, my son,' he said, 'if I die, to whom shall I leave you, my darlings?'

"His wife trailed in with all his children; Mashenka was in tears and I blubbered, too.

"Oh no,' he said. 'God will be merciful, He will not visit my transgressions on you.'

"Then he dismissed them all, told me to shut the door after them, and we were left alone, tête-à-tête.

"I have a favour to ask of you.'

"What favour?'

"Well, my dear boy, there is no rest for me even on my

deathbed. I am in want.'

"How so?' I positively flushed crimson, I could hardly speak.

"Why, I had to pay some of my own money into the Treasury. I grudge nothing for the public weal, my boy! I don't grudge my life. Don't you imagine any ill. I am sad to think that slanderers have blackened my name to you.... You were mistaken, my hair has gone white from grief. The Inspector is coming down upon us and Matveyev is seven thousand roubles short, and I shall have to answer for it.... Who else? It will be visited upon me, my boy: where were my eyes? And how can we get it from Matveyev? He has had trouble enough already: why should I bring the poor fellow to ruin?"

"Holy saints! I thought, 'what a just man! What a heart!'

"And I don't want to take my daughter's money, which has been set aside for her dowry: that sum is sacred. I have money of my own, it's true, but I have lent it all to friends—how is one to collect it all in a minute?"

"I simply fell on my knees before him. 'My benefactor!' I cried, 'I've wronged you, I have injured you; it was slanderers who wrote against you; don't break my heart, take back your money!'

"He looked at me and there were tears in his eyes. 'That was just what I expected from you, my son. Get up! I forgave you at the time for the sake of my daughter's tears—now my heart forgives you freely! You have healed my wounds. I bless you for all time!'

"Well, when he blessed me, gentlemen, I scurried home as soon as I could. I got the money:

"Here, father, here's the money. I've only spent fifty roubles.'

"Well, that's all right,' he said. 'But now every trifle may count; the time is short, write a report dated some days ago that you were short of money and had taken fifty roubles on account. I'll tell the authorities you had it in advance.'

"Well, gentlemen, what do you think? I did write that report, too!"

"Well, what then? What happened? How did it end?"

"As soon as I had written the report, gentlemen, this is how it ended. The next day, in the early morning, an envelope with a government seal arrived. I looked at it and what had I got? The sack! That is, instructions to hand over my work, to deliver the accounts—and to go about my business!"

"How so?"

"That's just what I cried at the top of my voice, 'How so?'

Gentlemen, there was a ringing in my ears. I thought there was no special reason for it—but no, the Inspector had arrived in the town. My heart sank. 'It's not for nothing,' I thought. And just as I was I rushed off to Fedosey Nikolaitch.

"How is this?' I said.

"What do you mean?' he said.

"Why, I am dismissed!'

"Dismissed? how?'

"Why, look at this!'

"Well, what of it?'

"Why, but I didn't ask for it!'

"Yes, you did—you sent in your papers on the first of—April. (I had never taken that letter back!)

"Fedosey Nikolaitch! I can't believe my ears, I can't believe my eyes! Is this you?'

"It is me, why?'

"My God!'

"I am sorry, sir. I am very sorry that you made up your mind to retire from the service so early. A young man ought to be in the service, and you've begun to be a little light-headed of late. And as for your character, set your mind at rest: I'll see to that! Your behaviour has always been so exemplary!'

"But that was a little joke, Fedosey Nikolaitch! I didn't mean it, I just gave you the letter for your fatherly ... that's all.'

"That's all? A queer joke, sir! Does one jest with documents like that? Why, you are sometimes sent to Siberia for such jokes. Now, good-bye. I am busy. We have the Inspector here—the duties of the service before everything; you can kick up your heels, but we have to sit here at work. But I'll get you a character—Oh, another thing: I've just bought a house from Matveyev. We are moving in in a day or two. So I expect I shall not have the pleasure of seeing you at our new residence. Bon voyage!'

"I ran home.

"We are lost, granny!'

"She wailed, poor dear, and then I saw the page from Fedosey Nikolaitch's running up with a note and a bird-cage, and in the cage there was a starling. In the fullness of my heart I had given her the starling. And in the note there were the words: 'April 1st,' and nothing more. What do you think of that, gentlemen?"

"What happened then? What happened then?"

"What then! I met Fedosey Nikolaitch once, I meant to tell him to his face he was a scoundrel."

"Well?"

"But somehow I couldn't bring myself to it, gentlemen."



# The Willows

By Algernon Blackwood



I After leaving Vienna, and long before you come to Buda-Pesth, the Danube enters a region of singular loneliness and desolation, where its waters spread away on all sides regardless of a main channel, and the country becomes a swamp for miles upon miles, covered by a vast sea of low willow-bushes. On the big maps this deserted area is painted in a fluffy blue, growing fainter in color as it leaves the banks, and across it may be seen in large straggling letters the word *Sümpfe*, meaning marshes. In high flood this great acreage of sand, shingle-beds, and willow-grown islands is almost topped by the water, but in normal seasons the bushes bend and rustle in the free winds, showing their silver leaves to the sunshine in an ever-moving plain of bewildering beauty. These willows never attain to the dignity of trees; they have no rigid trunks; they remain humble bushes, with rounded tops and soft outline, swaying on slender stems that answer to the least pressure of the wind; supple as grasses, and so continually shifting that they somehow give the impression that the entire plain is moving and alive. For the wind sends waves rising and falling over the whole surface, waves of leaves instead of waves of water, green swells like the sea, too, until the branches turn and lift, and then silvery white as their under-side turns to the sun.

Happy to slip beyond the control of stern banks, the Danube here wanders about at will among the intricate network of channels intersecting the islands everywhere with broad avenues down which the waters pour with a shouting sound; making whirlpools, eddies, and foaming rapids; tearing at the sandy banks; carrying away masses of shore and willow-clumps; and forming new islands innumerable which shift daily in size and shape and possess at best an impermanent life, since the flood-time obliterates their very existence.

Properly speaking, this fascinating part of the river's life begins soon after leaving Pressburg, and we, in our Canadian canoe, with gipsy tent and frying-pan on board, reached it on the crest of a rising flood about mid-July. That very same morning, when the sky was reddening before sunrise, we had slipped swiftly through still-sleeping Vienna, leaving it a couple of hours later a mere patch of smoke against the blue hills of the Wienerwald on the horizon; we had breakfasted below Fischeramend under a grove of birch trees roaring in the wind; and had then swept on the tearing current past Orth, Hainburg, Petronell (the old Roman Carnuntum of Marcus Aurelius), and so under the frowning heights of Theben on a spur of the Carpathians, where the March steals in quietly from the left and the frontier is crossed between Austria and Hungary.

Racing along at twelve kilometers an hour soon took us well into Hungary, and the muddy waters—sure sign of flood—sent us aground on many a shingle-bed, and twisted us like a cork in many a sudden belching whirlpool before the towers of Pressburg (Hungarian, *Poszóny*) showed against the sky; and then the canoe, leaping like a spirited horse, flew at top speed under the gray walls, negotiated safely the sunken chain of the *Fliegende Brücke* ferry, turned the corner sharply to the left, and plunged on yellow foam into the wilderness of islands, sand-banks, and swamp-land beyond—the land of the willows.

The change came suddenly, as when a series of bioscope pictures snaps down on the streets of a town and shifts without warning into the scenery of lake and forest. We entered the land of desolation on wings, and in less than half an hour there was neither boat nor fishing-hut nor red roof, nor any single sign of human habitation and civilization within sight. The sense of remoteness from the world of human kind, the utter isolation, the fascination of this singular world of willows, winds, and waters, instantly laid its spell upon us both, so that we allowed laughingly to one another that we ought by rights to have held some special kind of passport to admit us, and that we had, somewhat audaciously, come without asking leave into a separate little kingdom of wonder and magic—a kingdom that was reserved for the use of others who had a right to it, with everywhere unwritten warnings to trespassers for those who had the imagination to discover them.

Though still early in the afternoon, the ceaseless buffetings of a most tempestuous wind made us feel weary, and we at once began casting about for a suitable camping-ground for the night. But the bewildering character of the islands made landing difficult; the swirling flood carried us in-shore and then swept us out again; the willow branches tore our hands as we seized them to stop the canoe, and we pulled many a yard of sandy bank into the water before at length we shot with a great sideways blow from the wind into a backwater and managed to beach the bows

in a cloud of spray. Then we lay panting and laughing after our exertions on hot yellow sand, sheltered from the wind, and in the full blaze of a scorching sun, a cloudless blue sky above, and an immense army of dancing, shouting willow bushes, closing in from all sides, shining with spray and clapping their thousand little hands as though to applaud the success of our efforts.

"What a river!" I said to my companion, thinking of all the way we had traveled from the source in the Black Forest, and how we had often been obliged to wade and push in the upper shallows at the beginning of June.

"Won't stand much nonsense now, will it?" he said, pulling the canoe a little farther into safety up the sand, and then composing himself for a nap.

I lay by his side, happy and peaceful in the bath of the elements—water, wind, sand, and the great fire of the sun—thinking of the long journey that lay behind us, and of the great stretch before us to the Black Sea, and how lucky I was to have such a delightful and charming traveling companion as my friend, the Swede.

We had made many similar journeys together, but the Danube, more than any other river I knew, impressed us from the very beginning with its aliveness. From its tiny bubbling entry into the world among the pinewood gardens of *Donaueschingen*, until this moment when it began to play the great river-game of losing itself among the deserted swamps, unobserved, unrestrained, it had seemed to us like following the growth of some living creature. Sleepy at first, but later developing violent desires as it became conscious of its deep soul, it rolled, like some huge fluid being, through all the countries we had passed, holding our little craft on its mighty shoulders, playing roughly with us sometimes, yet always friendly and well-meaning, till at length we had come inevitably to regard it as a Great Personage.

How, indeed, could it be otherwise, since it told us so much of its secret life? At night we heard it singing to the moon as we lay in our tent, uttering that odd sibilant note peculiar to itself and said to be caused by the rapid tearing of the pebbles along its bed, so great is its hurrying speed. We knew, too, the voice of its gurgling whirlpools, suddenly bubbling up on a surface previously quite calm; the roar of its shallows and swift rapids; its constant steady thundering below all mere surface sounds; and that ceaseless tearing of its icy waters at the banks. How it stood up and shouted when the rains fell flat upon its face! And how its laughter roared out when the wind blew upstream and tried to stop its growing speed! We knew all its sounds and voices, its tumbings and foamings, its unnecessary splashing against the bridges; that self-conscious chatter when there were hills to look on; the affected dignity of its speech when it passed through the little towns, far too important to laugh; and all these faint, sweet whispers when the sun caught it fairly in some slow curve and poured down upon it till the steam rose.

It was full of tricks, too, in its early life before the great world knew it. There were places in the upper reaches among the Swabian forests, when yet the first whispers of its destiny had not reached it, where it elected to disappear through holes in the ground, to appear again on the other side of the porous limestone hills and start a new river with another name; leaving, too, so little water in its own bed that we had to climb out and wade and push the canoe through miles of shallows!

And a chief pleasure, in those early days of its irresponsible youth, was to lie low, like *Brer Fox*, just before the little turbulent tributaries came to join it from the Alps, and to refuse to acknowledge them when in, but to run for miles side by side, the dividing line well marked, the very levels different, the Danube utterly declining to recognize the new-comer. Below *Passau*, however, it gave up this particular trick, for there the *Inn* comes in with a thundering power impossible to ignore, and so pushes and incommodes the parent river that there is hardly room for them in the long twisting gorge that follows, and the Danube is shoved this way and that against the cliffs, and forced to hurry itself with great waves and much dashing to and fro in order to get through in time. And during the fight our canoe slipped down from its shoulder to its breast, and had the time of its life among the struggling waves. But the *Inn* taught the old river a lesson, and after *Passau* it no longer pretended to ignore new arrivals.

This was many days back, of course, and since then we had come to know other aspects of the great creature, and across the Bavarian wheat plain of *Straubing* she wandered so slowly under the blazing June sun that we could well imagine only the surface inches were water, while below there moved, concealed as by a silken mantle, a whole army of *Undines*, passing silently and unseen down to the sea, and very leisurely too, lest they be discovered.

Much, too, we forgave her because of her friendliness to the birds and animals that haunted the shores. Cormorants lined the banks in lonely places in rows like short black palings; gray crows crowded the shingle-beds; storks stood fishing in the vistas of shallower water that opened up between the islands, and hawks, swans, and marsh birds of all sorts filled the air with glinting wings and singing, petulant cries. It was impossible to feel annoyed with the river's vagaries after seeing a deer leap with a splash into the water at sunrise and swim past the bows of the canoe; and often we saw fawns peering at us from the underbrush, or looked straight into the brown eyes of a stag as we charged full tilt round a corner and entered another reach of the river. Foxes, too, everywhere haunted the banks, tripping daintily among the driftwood and disappearing so suddenly that it was impossible to see how they managed it.

But now, after leaving Pressburg, everything changed a little, and the Danube became more serious. It ceased trifling. It was halfway to the Black Sea, within scenting distance almost of other, stranger countries where no tricks would be permitted or understood. It became suddenly grown-up, and claimed our respect and even our awe. It broke out into three arms, for one thing, that only met again a hundred kilometers farther down, and for a canoe there were no indications which one was intended to be followed.

"If you take a side channel," said the Hungarian officer we met in the Pressburg shop while buying provisions, "you may find yourselves, when the flood subsides, forty miles from anywhere, high and dry, and you may easily starve. There are no people, no farms, no fishermen. I warn you not to continue. The river, too, is still rising, and this wind will increase."

The rising river did not alarm us in the least, but the matter of being left high and dry by a sudden subsidence of the waters might be serious, and we had consequently laid in an extra stock of provisions. For the rest, the officer's prophecy held true, and the wind, blowing down a perfectly clear sky, increased steadily till it reached the dignity of a westerly gale.

It was earlier than usual when we camped, for the sun was a good hour or two from the horizon, and leaving my friend still asleep on the hot sand, I wandered about in desultory examination of our hotel. The island, I found, was less than an acre in extent, a mere sandy bank standing some two or three feet above the level of the river. The far end, pointing into the sunset, was covered with flying spray which the tremendous wind drove off the crests of the broken waves. It was triangular in shape, with the apex upstream.

I stood there for several minutes, watching the impetuous crimson flood bearing down with a shouting roar, dashing in waves against the bank as though to sweep it bodily away, and then swirling by in two foaming streams on either side. The ground seemed to shake with the shock and rush while the furious movement of the willow bushes as the wind poured over them increased the curious illusion that the island itself actually moved. Above, for a mile or two, I could see the great river descending upon me: it was like looking up the slope of a sliding hill, white with foam, and leaping up everywhere to show itself to the sun.

The rest of the island was too thickly grown with willows to make walking pleasant, but I made the tour, nevertheless. From the lower end the light, of course, changed, and the river looked dark and angry. Only the backs of the flying waves were visible, streaked with foam, and pushed forcibly by the great puffs of wind that fell upon them from behind. For a short mile it was visible, pouring in and out among the islands, and then disappearing with a huge sweep into the willows, which closed about it like a herd of monstrous antediluvian creatures crowding down to drink. They made me think of gigantic sponge-like growths that sucked the river up into themselves. They caused it to vanish from sight. They herded there together in such overpowering numbers.

Altogether it was an impressive scene, with its utter loneliness, its bizarre suggestion; and as I gazed, long and curiously, a singular emotion began stir somewhere in the depths of me. Midway in my delight of the wild beauty, there crept unbidden and unexplained, a curious feeling of disquietude, almost of alarm.

A rising river, perhaps, always suggests something of the ominous: many of the little islands I saw before me would probably have been swept away by the morning; this resistless, thundering flood of water touched the sense of awe. Yet I was aware that my uneasiness lay deeper far than the emotions of awe and wonder. It was not that I felt. Nor had it directly to do with the power of the driving wind—this shouting hurricane that

might almost carry up a few acres of willows into the air and scatter them like so much chaff over the landscape. The wind was simply enjoying itself, for nothing rose out of the flat landscape to stop it, and I was conscious of sharing its great game with a kind of pleasurable excitement. Yet this novel emotion had nothing to do with the wind. Indeed, so vague was the sense of distress I experienced, that it was impossible to trace it to its source and deal with it accordingly, though I was aware somehow that it had to do with my realization of our utter insignificance before this unrestrained power of the elements about me. The huge-grown river had something to do with it too—a vague, unpleasant idea that we had somehow trifled with these great elemental forces in whose power we lay helpless every hour of the day and night. For here, indeed, they were gigantically at play together, and the sight appealed to the imagination.

But my emotion, so far as I could understand it, seemed to attach itself more particularly to the willow bushes, to these acres and acres of willows, crowding, so thickly growing there, swarming everywhere the eye could reach, pressing upon the river as though to suffocate it, standing in dense array mile after mile beneath the sky, watching, waiting, listening. And, apart quite from the elements, the willows connected themselves subtly with my malaise, attacking the mind insidiously somehow by reason of their vast numbers, and contriving in some way or other to represent to the imagination a new and mighty power, a power, moreover, not altogether friendly to us.

Great revelations of nature, of course, never fail to impress in one way or another, and I was no stranger to moods of the kind. Mountains overawe and oceans terrify, while the mystery of great forests exercises a spell peculiarly its own. But all these, at one point or another, somewhere link on intimately with human life and human experience. They stir comprehensible, even if alarming, emotions. They tend on the whole to exalt.

With this multitude of willows, however, it was something far different, I felt. Some essence emanated from them that besieged the heart. A sense of awe awakened, true, but of awe touched somewhere by a vague terror. Their serried ranks growing everywhere darker about me as the shadows deepened, moving furiously yet softly in the wind, woke in me the curious and unwelcome suggestion that we had trespassed here upon the borders of an alien world, a world where we were intruders, a world where we were not wanted or invited to remain—where we ran grave risks perhaps!

The feeling, however, though it refused to yield its meaning entirely to analysis, did not at the time trouble me by passing into menace. Yet it never left me quite, even during the very practical business of putting up the tent in a hurricane of wind and building a fire for the stew-pot. It remained, just enough to bother and perplex, and to rob a most delightful camping-ground of a good portion of its charm. To my companion, however, I said nothing, for he was a man I considered devoid of imagination. In the first place, I could never have explained to him what I meant, and in the second, he would have laughed stupidly at me if I had. There was a slight depression in the center of the island, and here we pitched the tent. The surrounding willows broke the wind a bit.

"A poor camp," observed the imperturbable Swede when at last the tent stood upright; "no stones and precious little firewood. I'm for moving on early to-morrow—eh? This sand won't hold anything."

But the experience of a collapsing tent at midnight had taught us many devices, and we made the cosy gipsy house as safe as possible, and then set about collecting a store of wood to last till bedtime. Willow bushes drop no branches, and driftwood was our only source of supply. We hunted the shores pretty thoroughly. Everywhere the banks were crumbling as the rising flood tore at them and carried away great portions with a splash and a gurgle.

"The island's much smaller than when we landed," said the accurate Swede. "It won't last long at this rate. We'd better drag the canoe close to the tent, and be ready to start at a moment's notice. I shall sleep in my clothes."

He was a little distance off, climbing along the bank, and I heard his rather jolly laugh as he spoke.

"By Jove!" I heard him call, a moment later, and turned to see what had caused his exclamation; but for the moment he was hidden by the willows, and I could not find him.

"What in the world's this?" I heard him cry again, and this time his voice had become serious.

I ran up quickly and joined him on the bank. He was looking over the river, pointing at something in the water.

"Good Heavens, it's a man's body!" he cried excitedly. "Look!"

A black thing, turning over and over in the foaming waves, swept rapidly past. It kept disappearing and coming up to the surface again. It was about twenty feet from the shore, and just as it was opposite to where we stood it lurched round and looked straight at us. We saw its eyes reflecting the sunset, and gleaming an odd yellow as the body turned over. Then it gave a swift, gulping plunge, and dived out of sight in a flash.

"An otter, by gad!" we exclaimed in the same breath, laughing. It was an otter, alive, and out on the hunt; yet it had looked exactly like the body of a drowned man turning helplessly in the current. Far below it came to the surface once again, and we saw its black skin, wet and shining in the sunlight.

Then, too, just as we turned back, our arms full of driftwood, another thing happened to recall us to the river bank. This time it really was a man, and what was more, a man in a boat. Now a small boat on the Danube was an unusual sight at any time, but here in this deserted region, and at flood time, it was so unexpected as to constitute a real event. We stood and stared.

Whether it was due to the slanting sunlight, or the refraction from the wonderfully illumined water, I cannot say, but whatever the cause, I found it difficult to focus my sight properly upon the flying apparition. It seemed, however, to be a man standing upright in a sort of flat-bottomed boat, steering with a long oar, and being carried down the opposite shore at a tremendous pace. He apparently was looking across in our direction, but the distance was too great and the light too uncertain for us to make out very plainly what he was about. It seemed to me that he was gesticulating and making signs at us. His voice came across the water to us shouting something furiously but the wind drowned it so that no single word was audible. There was something curious about the whole appearance—man, boat, signs, voice—that made an impression on me out of all proportion to its cause.

"He's crossing himself!" I cried. "Look, he's making the sign of the cross!"

"I believe you're right," the Swede said, shading his eyes with his hand and watching the man out of sight. He seemed to be gone in a moment, melting away down there into the sea of willows where the sun caught them in the bend of the river and turned them into a great crimson wall of beauty. Mist, too, had begun to rise, so that the air was hazy.

"But what in the world is he doing at nightfall on this flooded river?" I said, half to myself. "Where is he going at such a time, and what did he mean by his signs and shouting? D'you think he wished to warn us about something?"

"He saw our smoke, and thought we were spirits probably," laughed my companion. "These Hungarians believe in all sorts of rubbish: you remember the shopwoman at Pressburg warning us that no one ever landed here because it belonged to some sort of beings outside man's world! I suppose they believe in fairies and elementals, possibly demons too. That peasant in the boat saw people on the islands for the first time in his life," he added, after a slight pause, "and it scared him, that's all." The Swede's tone of voice was not convincing, and his manner lacked something that was usually there. I noted the change instantly while he talked, though without being able to label it precisely.

"If they had enough imagination," I laughed loudly—"I remember trying to make as much noise as I could—"they might well people a place like this with the old gods of antiquity. The Romans must have haunted all this region more or less with their shrines and sacred groves and elemental deities."

The subject dropped and we returned to our stew-pot, for my friend was not given to imaginative conversation as a rule.

Moreover, just then I remember feeling distinctly glad that he was not imaginative; his stolid, practical nature suddenly seemed to me welcome and comforting. It was an admirable temperament, I felt: he could steer down rapids like a red Indian, shoot dangerous bridges and whirlpools better than any white man I ever saw in a canoe. He was a grand fellow for an adventurous trip, a tower of strength when untoward things happened. I looked at his strong face and light curly hair as he staggered along under his pile of driftwood (twice the size of mine!), and I experienced a feeling of relief. Yes, I was distinctly glad just then that the Swede was—what he was, and that he never made remarks that suggested more than they said.

"The river's still rising, though," he added, as if following out some thoughts of his own, and dropping his load with a gasp. "This island will be under water in two days if it goes on."

"I wish the wind would go down," I said. "I don't care a fig for the river."

The flood, indeed, had no terrors for us; we could get off at ten minutes' notice, and the more water the better we liked it. It

meant an increasing current and the obliteration of the treacherous shingle-beds that so often threatened to tear the bottom out of our canoe.

Contrary to our expectations, the wind did not go down with the sun. It seemed to increase with the darkness, howling overhead and shaking the willows round us like straws. Curious sounds accompanied it sometimes, like the explosion of heavy guns, and it fell upon the water and the island in great flat blows of immense power. It made me think of the sounds a planet must make, could we only hear it, driving along through space.

But the sky kept wholly clear of clouds, and soon after supper the full moon rose up in the east and covered the river and the plain of shouting willows with a light like the day.

We lay on the sandy patch beside the fire, smoking, listening to the noises of the night round us, and talking happily of the journey we had already made, and of our plans ahead. The map lay spread in the door of the tent, but the high wind made it hard to study, and presently we lowered the curtain and extinguished the lantern. The firelight was enough to smoke and see each other's faces by, and the sparks flew about overhead like fireworks. A few yards beyond, the river gurgled and hissed, and from time to time a heavy splash announced the falling away of further portions of the bank.

Our talk, I noticed, had to do with the far-away scenes and incidents of our first camps in the Black Forest, or of other subjects altogether remote from the present setting, for neither of us spoke of the actual moment more than was necessary—almost as though we had agreed tacitly to avoid discussion of the camp and its incidents. Neither the otter nor the boatman, for instance, received the honor of a single mention, though ordinarily these would have furnished discussion for the greater part of the evening. They were, of course, distinct events in such a place.

The scarcity of wood made it a business to keep the fire going, for the wind, that drove the smoke in our faces wherever we sat, helped at the same time to make a forced draught. We took it in turn to make foraging expeditions into the darkness, and the quantity the Swede brought back always made me feel that he took an absurdly long time finding it; for the fact was I did not care much about being left alone, and yet it always seemed to be my turn to grub about among the bushes or scramble along the slippery banks in the moonlight. The long day's battle with wind and water—such wind and such water!—had tired us both, and an early bed was the obvious program. Yet neither of us made the move for the tent. We lay there, tending the fire, talking in desultory fashion, peering about us into the dense willow bushes, and listening to the thunder of wind and river. The loneliness of the place had entered our very bones, and silence seemed natural, for after a bit the sound of our voices became a trifle unreal and forced; whispering would have been the fitting mode of communication, I felt, and the human voice, always rather absurd amid the roar of the elements, now carried with it something almost illegitimate. It was like talking out loud in church, or in some place where it was not lawful, perhaps not quite safe, to be overheard.

The eeriness of this lonely island, set among a million willows, swept by a hurricane, and surrounded by hurrying deep waters, touched us both, I fancy. Untrodden by man, almost unknown to man, it lay there beneath the moon, remote from human influence, on the frontier of another world, an alien world, a world tenanted by willows only and the souls of willows. And we, in our rashness, had dared to invade it, even to make use of it! Something more than the power of its mystery stirred in me as I lay on the sand, feet to fire, and peered up through the leaves at the stars. For the last time I rose to get firewood.

"When this has burnt up," I said firmly, "I shall turn in," and my companion watched me lazily as I moved off into the surrounding shadows.

For an unimaginative man I thought he seemed unusually receptive that night, unusually open to suggestion of things other than sensory. He too was touched by the beauty and loneliness of the place. I was not altogether pleased, I remember, to recognize this slight change in him, and instead of immediately collecting sticks, I made my way to the far point of the island where the moonlight on plain and river could be seen to better advantage. The desire to be alone had come suddenly upon me; my former dread returned in force; there was a vague feeling in me I wished to face and probe to the bottom.

When I reached the point of sand jutting out among the waves, the spell of the place descended upon me with a positive shock. No mere "scenery" could have produced such an effect. There was something more here, something to alarm.

I gazed across the waste of wild waters; I watched the whispering willows; I heard the ceaseless beating of the tireless wind; and, one and all, each in its own way, stirred in me this sensation of a strange distress. But the willows especially: for ever they went on chattering and talking among themselves, laughing a little, shrilly crying out, sometimes sighing—but what it was they made so much to-do about belonged to the secret life of the great plain they inhabited. And it was utterly alien to the world I knew, or to that of the wild yet kindly elements. They made me think of a host of beings from another plane of life, another evolution altogether, perhaps, all discussing a mystery known only to themselves. I watched them moving busily together, oddly shaking their big bushy heads, twirling their myriad leaves even when there was no wind. They moved of their own will as though alive, and they touched, by some incalculable method, my own keen sense of the horrible.

There they stood in the moonlight, like a vast army surrounding our camp, shaking their innumerable silver spears defiantly, formed all ready for an attack.

The psychology of places, for some imaginations at least, is very vivid; for the wanderer, especially, camps have their "note" either of welcome or rejection. At first it may not always be apparent, because the busy preparations of tent and cooking prevent, but with the first pause—after supper usually—it comes and announces itself. And the note of this willow-camp now became unmistakably plain to me: we were interlopers, trespassers, we were not welcomed. The sense of unfamiliarity grew upon me as I stood there watching. We touched the frontier of a region where our presence was resented. For a night's lodging we might perhaps be tolerated; but for a prolonged and inquisitive stay—No! by all the gods of the trees and the wilderness, no! We were the first human influences upon this island, and we were not wanted. The willows were against us.

Strange thoughts like these, bizarre fancies, borne I know not whence, found lodgment in my mind as I stood listening. What, I thought, if, after all, these crouching willows proved to be alive; if suddenly they should rise up, like a swarm of living creatures, marshaled by the gods whose territory we had invaded, sweep towards us off the vast swamps, booming overhead in the night—and then settle down! As I looked it was so easy to imagine they actually moved, crept nearer, retreated a little, huddled together in masses, hostile, waiting for the great wind that should finally start them a-running. I could have sworn their aspect changed a little, and their ranks deepened and pressed more closely together.

The melancholy shrill cry of a night bird sounded overhead, and suddenly I nearly lost my balance as the piece of bank I stood upon fell with a great splash into the river, undermined by the flood. I stepped back just in time, and went on hunting for firewood again, half laughing at the odd fancies that crowded so thickly into my mind and cast their spell upon me. I recall the Swede's remark about moving on next day, and I was just thinking that I fully agreed with him, when I turned with a start and saw the subject of my thoughts standing immediately in front of me. He was quite close. The roar of the elements had covered his approach.

"You've been gone so long," he shouted above the wind, "I thought something must have happened to you." But there was that in his tone, and a certain look in his face as well, that conveyed to me more than his actual words, and in a flash I understood the real reason for his coming. It was because the spell of the place had entered his soul too, and he did not like being alone.

"River still rising," he cried, pointing to the flood in the moonlight, "and the wind's simply awful."

He always said the same things, but it was the cry for companionship that gave the real importance to his words.

"Lucky," I cried back, "our tent's in the hollow. I think it'll hold all right." I added something about the difficulty of finding wood, in order to explain my absence, but the wind caught my words and flung them across the river, so that he did not hear, but just looked at me through the branches, nodding his head.

"Lucky if we get away without disaster!" he shouted, or words to that effect; and I remember feeling half angry with him for putting the thought into words, for it was exactly what I felt myself. There was disaster impending somewhere, and the sense of presentiment lay unpleasantly upon me.

We went back to the fire and made a final blaze, poking it up with our feet. We took a last look round. But for the wind the heat would have been unpleasant. I put this thought into words, and I remember my friend's reply struck me oddly: that he would

rather have the heat, the ordinary July weather, than this "diabolical wind."

Everything was snug for the night; the canoe lying turned over beside the tent, with both yellow paddles beneath her; the provision sack hanging from a willow stem, and the washed-up dishes removed to a safe distance from the fire, all ready for the morning meal.

We smothered the embers of the fire with sand, and then turned in. The flap of the tent door was up, and I saw the branches and the stars and the white moonlight. The shaking willows and the heavy buffeting of the wind against our taut little house were the last things I remembered as sleep came down and covered all with its soft and delicious forgetfulness.

## II

Suddenly I found myself lying awake, peering from my sandy mattress through the door of the tent. I looked at my watch pinned against the canvas, and saw by the bright moonlight that it was past twelve o'clock—the threshold of a new day—and I had therefore slept a couple of hours. The Swede was asleep still beside me; the wind howled as before something plucked at my heart and made me feel afraid. There was a sense of disturbance in my immediate neighborhood.

I sat up quickly and looked out. The trees were swaying violently to and fro as the gusts smote them, but our little bit of green canvas lay snugly safe in the hollow, for the wind passed over it without meeting enough resistance to make it vicious. The feeling of disquietude did not pass however, and I crawled quietly out of the tent to see if our belongings were safe. I moved carefully so as not to waken my companion. A curious excitement was on me.

I was halfway out, kneeling on all fours, when my eye first took in that the tops of the bushes opposite, with their moving tracery of leaves, made shapes against the sky. I sat back on my haunches and stared. It was incredible, surely, but there, opposite and slightly above me, were shapes of some indeterminate sort among the willows, and as the branches swayed in the wind they seemed to group themselves about these shapes, forming a series of monstrous outlines that shifted rapidly beneath the moon. Close, about fifty feet in front of me, I saw these things.

My first instinct was to waken my companion that he too might see them, but something made me hesitate—the sudden realization, probably, that I should not welcome corroboration; and meanwhile I crouched there staring in amazement with smarting eyes. I was wide awake. I remember saying to myself that I was not dreaming.

They first became properly visible, these huge figures, just within the tops of the bushes—immense bronze-colored, moving, and wholly independent of the swaying of the branches. I saw them plainly and noted, now I came to examine them more calmly, that they were very much larger than human, and indeed that something in their appearance proclaimed them to be not human at all. Certainly they were not merely the moving tracery of the branches against the moonlight. They shifted independently. They rose upwards in a continuous stream from earth to sky, vanishing utterly as soon as they reached the dark of the sky. They were interlaced one with another, making a great column, and I saw their limbs and huge bodies melting in and out of each other, forming this serpentine line that bent and swayed and twisted spirally with the contortions of the wind-tossed trees. They were nude, fluid shapes, passing up the bushes, within the leaves almost—rising up in a living column into the heavens. Their faces I never could see. Unceasingly they poured upwards, swaying in great bending curves, with a hue of dull bronze upon their skins.

I stared, trying to force every atom of vision from my eyes. For a long time I thought they must every moment disappear and resolve themselves into the movements of the branches and prove to be an optical illusion. I searched everywhere for a proof of reality, when all the while I understood quite well that the standard of reality had changed. For the longer I looked the more certain I became that these figures were real and living, though perhaps not according to the standards that the camera and the biologist would insist upon.

Far from feeling fear, I was possessed with a sense of awe and wonder such as I have never known. I seemed to be gazing at the personified elemental forces of this haunted and primeval region. Our intrusion had stirred the powers of the place into activity. It was we who were the cause of the disturbance, and my brain filled to bursting with stories and legends of the spirits and deities of places that have been acknowledged and worshiped by

men in all ages of the world's history. But, before I could arrive at any possible explanation, something impelled me to go farther out, and I crept forward on to the sand and stood upright. I felt the ground still warm under my bare feet; the wind tore at my hair and face; and the sound of the river burst upon my ears with a sudden roar. These things, I knew, were real, and proved that my senses were acting normally. Yet the figures still rose from earth to heaven, silent, majestically, in a great spiral of grace and strength that overwhelmed me at length with a genuine deep emotion of worship. I felt that I must fall down and worship—absolutely worship.

Perhaps in another minute I might have done so, when a gust of wind swept against me with such force that it blew me sideways, and I nearly stumbled and fell. It seemed to shake the dream violently out of me. At least it gave me another point of view somehow. The figures still remained, still ascended into heaven from the heart of the night, but my reason at last began to assert itself. It must be a subjective experience, I argued—none the less real for that, but still subjective. The moonlight and the branches combined to work out these pictures upon the mirror of my imagination, and for some reason I projected them outwards and made them appear objective. I knew this must be the case, of course. I was the subject of a vivid and interesting hallucination. I took courage, and began to move forward across the open patches of sand. By Jove, though, was it all hallucination? Was it merely subjective? Did not my reason argue in the old futile way from the little standard of the known?

I only know that great column of figures ascended darkly into the sky for what seemed a very long period of time, and with a very complete measure of reality as most men are accustomed to gauge reality. Then suddenly they were gone!

And, once they were gone and the immediate wonder of their great presence had passed, fear came down upon me with a cold rush. The esoteric meaning of this lonely and haunted region suddenly flamed up within me and I began to tremble dreadfully. I took a quick look round—a look of horror that came near to panic—calculating vainly ways of escape; and then, realizing how helpless I was to achieve anything really effective, I crept back silently into the tent and lay down again upon my sandy mattress, first lowering the door-curtain to shut out the sight of the willows in the moonlight, and then burying my head as deeply as possible beneath the blankets to deaden the sound of the terrifying wind.

III  
As though further to convince me that I had not been dreaming, I remember that it was a long time before I fell again into a troubled and restless sleep; and even then only the upper crust of me slept, and underneath there was something that never quite lost consciousness, but lay alert and on the watch. But this second time I jumped up with a genuine start of terror. It was neither the wind nor the river that woke me, but the slow approach of something that caused the sleeping portion of me to grow smaller and smaller till at last it vanished altogether, and I found myself sitting bolt upright—listening.

Outside there was a sound of multitudinous little patterings. They had been coming, I was aware, for a long time, and in my sleep they had first become audible. I sat there nervously wide awake as though I had not slept at all. It seemed to me that my breathing came with difficulty, and that there was a great weight upon the surface of my body. In spite of the hot night, I felt clammy with cold and shivered. Something surely was pressing steadily against the sides of the tent and weighing down upon it from above. Was it the body of the wind? Was this the pattering rain, the dripping of the leaves? The spray blown from the river by the wind and gathering in big drops? I thought quickly of a dozen things.

Then suddenly the explanation leaped into my mind: a bough from the poplar, the only large tree on the island, had fallen with the wind. Still half caught by the other branches, it would fall with the next gust and crush us, and meanwhile its leaves brushed and tapped upon the tight canvas surface of the tent. I raised the loose flap and rushed out, calling to the Swede to follow.

But when I got out and stood upright I saw that the tent was free. There was no hanging bough; there was no rain or spray; nothing approached.

A cold, gray light filtered down through the bushes and lay on the faintly gleaming sand. Stars still crowded the sky directly overhead, and the wind howled magnificently, but the fire no longer gave out any glow, and I saw the east reddening in streaks

through the trees. Several hours must have passed since I stood there before, watching the ascending figures, and the memory of it now came back to me horribly, like an evil dream. Oh, how tired it made me feel, that ceaseless raging wind! Yet, though the deep lassitude of a sleepless night was on me, my nerves were tingling with the activity of an equally tireless apprehension, and all idea of repose was out of the question. The river I saw had risen further. Its thunder filled the air, and a fine spray made itself felt through my thin sleeping shirt.

Yet nowhere did I discover the slightest evidences of anything to cause alarm. This deep, prolonged disturbance in my heart remained wholly unaccounted for.

My companion had not stirred when I called him, and there was no need to waken him now. I looked about me carefully, noting everything: the turned-over canoe; the yellow paddles—two of them, I'm certain; the provision sack and the extra lantern hanging together from the tree; and, crowding everywhere about me, enveloping all, the willows, those endless, shaking willows. A bird uttered its morning cry, and a string of duck passed with whirring flight overhead in the twilight. The sand whirled, dry and stinging, about my bare feet in the wind.

I walked round the tent and then went out a little way into the bush, so that I could see across the river to the farther landscape, and the same profound yet indefinable emotion of distress seized upon me again as I saw the interminable sea of bushes stretching to the horizon, looking ghostly and unreal in the wan light of dawn. I walked softly here and there, still puzzling over that odd sound of infinite pattering, and of that pressure upon the tent that had wakened me. It must have been the wind, I reflected—the wind beating upon the loose, hot sand, driving the dry particles smartly against the taut canvas—the wind dropping heavily upon our fragile roof.

Yet all the time my nervousness and malaise increased appreciably.

I crossed over to the farther shore and noted how the coast line had altered in the night, and what masses of sand the river had torn away. I dipped my hands and feet into the cool current, and bathed my forehead. Already there was a glow of sunrise in the sky and the exquisite freshness of coming day. On my way back I passed purposely beneath the very bushes where I had seen the column of figures rising into the air, and midway among the clumps I suddenly found myself overtaken by a sense of vast terror. From the shadows a large figure went swiftly by. Some one passed me, as sure as ever man did....

It was a great staggering blow from the wind that helped me forward again, and once out in the more open space, the sense of terror diminished strangely. The winds were about and walking, I remember saying to myself; for the winds often move like great presences under the trees. And altogether the fear that hovered about me was such an unknown and immense kind of fear, so unlike anything I had ever felt before, that it woke a sense of awe and wonder in me that did much to counteract its worst effects; and when I reached a high point in the middle of the island from which I could see the wide stretch of river, crimson in the sunrise, the whole magical beauty of it all was so overpowering that a sort of wild yearning woke in me and almost brought a cry up into the throat.

But this cry found no expression, for as my eyes wandered from the plain beyond to the island round me and noted our little tent half hidden among the willows, a dreadful discovery leaped out at me, compared to which my terror of the walking winds seemed as nothing at all.

For a change, I thought, had somehow come about in the arrangement of the landscape. It was not that my point of vantage gave me a different view, but that an alteration had apparently been effected in the relation of the tent to the willows, and of the willows to the tent. Surely the bushes now crowded much closer—unnecessarily, unpleasantly close. They had moved nearer.

Creeping with silent feet over the shifting sands, drawing imperceptibly nearer by soft, unhurried movements, the willows had come closer during the night. But had the wind moved them, or had they moved of themselves? I recalled the sound of infinite small patterings and the pressure upon the tent and upon my own heart that caused me to wake in terror. I swayed for a moment in the wind like a tree, finding it hard to keep my upright position on the sandy hillock. There was a suggestion here of personal agency, of deliberate intention, of aggressive hostility, and it terrified me into a sort of rigidity.

Then the reaction followed quickly. The idea was so bizarre, so absurd, that I felt inclined to laugh. But the laughter came no

more readily than the cry, for the knowledge that my mind was so receptive to such dangerous imaginings brought the additional terror that it was through our minds and not through our physical bodies that the attack would come, and was coming.

The wind buffeted me about, and, very quickly it seemed, the sun came up over the horizon, for it was after four o'clock, and I must have stood on that little pinnacle of sand longer than I knew, afraid to come down at close quarters with the willows. I returned quietly, creepily, to the tent, first taking another exhaustive look round and—yes, I confess it—making a few measurements. I paced out on the warm sand the distances between the willows and the tent, making a note of the shortest distance particularly.

I crawled stealthily into my blankets. My companion, to all appearances, still slept soundly, and I was glad that this was so. Provided my experiences were not corroborated, I could find strength somehow to deny them, perhaps. With the daylight I could persuade myself that it was all a subjective hallucination, a fantasy of the night, a projection of the excited imagination.

Nothing further came to disturb me, and I fell asleep almost at once, utterly exhausted, yet still in dread of hearing again that weird sound of multitudinous pattering, or of feeling the pressure upon my heart that had made it difficult to breathe.

The sun was high in the heavens when my companion woke me from a heavy sleep and announced that the porridge was cooked and there was just time to bathe. The grateful smell of frizzling bacon entered the tent door.

"River still rising," he said, "and several islands out in midstream have disappeared altogether. Our own island's much smaller."

"Any wood left?" I asked sleepily.

"The wood and the island will finish to-morrow in a dead heat," he laughed, "but there's enough to last us till then."

I plunged in from the point of the island, which had indeed altered a lot in size and shape during the night, and was swept down in a moment to the landing place opposite the tent. The water was icy, and the banks flew by like the country from an express train. Bathing under such conditions was an exhilarating operation, and the terror of the night seemed cleansed out of me by a process of evaporation in the brain. The sun was blazing hot; not a cloud showed itself anywhere; the wind, however, had not abated one little jot.

Quite suddenly then the implied meaning of the Swede's words flashed across me, showing that he no longer wished to leave posthaste, and had changed his mind. "Enough to last till to-morrow"—he assumed we should stay on the island another night. It struck me as odd. The night before he was so positive the other way. How had the change come about?

Great crumbings of the banks occurred at breakfast, with heavy splashing and clouds of spray which the wind brought into our frying-pan, and my fellow-traveler talked incessantly about the difficulty the Vienna-Pesth steamers must have to find the channel in flood. But the state of his mind interested and impressed me far more than the state of the river or the difficulties of the steamers. He had changed somehow since the evening before. His manner was different—a trifle excited, a trifle shy, with a sort of suspicion about his voice and gestures. I hardly know how to describe it now in cold blood, but at the time I remember being quite certain of one thing, viz., that he had become frightened!

He ate very little breakfast, and for once omitted to smoke his pipe. He had the map spread open beside him, and kept studying its markings.

"We'd better get off sharp in an hour," I said presently, feeling for an opening that must bring him indirectly to a partial discomfort at any rate. And his answer puzzled me uncomfortably: "Rather! If they'll let us."

"Who'll let us? The elements?" I asked quickly, with affected indifference.

"The powers of this awful place, whoever they are," he replied, keeping his eyes on the map. "The gods are here, if they are anywhere at all in the world."

"The elements are always the true immortals," I replied, laughing as naturally as I could manage, yet knowing quite well that my face reflected my true feelings when he looked up gravely at me and spoke across the smoke:

"We shall be fortunate if we get away without further disaster."

This was exactly what I had dreaded, and I screwed myself up to the point of the direct question. It was like agreeing to allow the dentist to extract the tooth; it had to come anyhow in the long run, and the rest was all pretense.

"Further disaster! Why, what's happened?"

"For one thing—the steering paddle's gone," he said quietly.

"The steering paddle gone!" I repeated, greatly excited, for this was our rudder, and the Danube in flood without a rudder was suicide. "But what—"

"And there's a tear in the bottom of the canoe," he added, with a genuine little tremor in his voice.

I continued staring at him, able only to repeat the words in his face somewhat foolishly. There, in the heat of the sun, and on this burning sand, I was aware of a freezing atmosphere descending round us. I got up to follow him, for he merely nodded his head gravely and led the way towards the tent a few yards on the other side of the fireplace. The canoe still lay there as I had last seen her in the night, ribs uppermost, the paddles, or rather, the paddle, on the sand beside her.

"There's only one," he said, stooping to pick it up. "And here's the rent in the base-board."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I had clearly noticed two paddles a few hours before, but a second impulse made me think better of it, and I said nothing. I approached to see.

There was a long, finely made tear in the bottom of the canoe where a little slither of wood had been neatly taken clean out; it looked as if the tooth of a sharp rock or snag had eaten down her length, and investigation showed that the hole went through. Had we launched out in her without observing it we must inevitably have foundered. At first the water would have made the wood swell so as to close the hole, but once out in midstream the water must have poured in, and the canoe, never more than two inches above the surface, would have filled and sunk very rapidly.

"There, you see, an attempt to prepare a victim for the sacrifice," I heard him saying, more to himself than to me, "two victims rather," he added as he bent over and ran his fingers along the slit.

I began to whistle—a thing I always do unconsciously when utterly nonplused—and purposely paid no attention to his words. I was determined to consider them foolish.

"It wasn't there last night," he said presently, straightening up from his examination and looking anywhere but at me.

"We must have scratched her in landing, of course," I stopped whistling to say, "The stones are very sharp—"

I stopped abruptly, for at that moment he turned round and met my eye squarely. I knew just as well as he did how impossible my explanation was. There were no stones, to begin with.

"And then there's this to explain too," he added quietly, handing me the paddle and pointing to the blade.

A new and curious emotion spread freezingly over me as I took and examined it. The blade was scraped down all over, beautifully scraped, as though someone had sand-papered it with care, making it so thin that the first vigorous stroke must have snapped it off at the elbow.

"One of us walked in his sleep and did this thing," I said feebly, "or—or it has been filed by the constant stream of sand particles blown against it by the wind, perhaps."

"Ah," said the Swede, turning away, laughing a little, "you can explain everything!"

"The same wind that caught the steering paddle and flung it so near the bank that it fell in with the next lump that crumbled," I called out after him, absolutely determined to find an explanation for everything he showed me.

"I see," he shouted back, turning his head to look at me before disappearing among the willow bushes.

Once alone with these perplexing evidences of personal agency, I think my first thought took the form of "One of us must have done this thing, and it certainly was not I." But my second thought decided how impossible it was to suppose, under all the circumstances, that either of us had done it. That my companion, the trusted friend of a dozen similar expeditions, could have knowingly had a hand in it, was a suggestion not to be entertained for a moment. Equally absurd seemed the explanation that this imperturbable and densely practical nature had suddenly become insane and was busied with insane purposes.

Yet the fact remained that what disturbed me most, and kept my fear actively alive even in this blaze of sunshine and wild beauty, was the clear certainty that some curious alteration had come about in his mind—that he was nervous, timid, suspicious, aware of goings on he did not speak about, watching a series of secret and hitherto unmentionable events—waiting, in a word, for a climax that he expected, and, I thought, expected very soon. This grew up in my mind intuitively—I hardly knew how.

I made a hurried examination of the tent and its surroundings,

but the measurements of the night remained the same. There were deep hollows formed in the sand, I now noticed for the first time, basin-shaped and of various depths and sizes, varying from that of a teacup to a large bowl. The wind, no doubt, was responsible for these miniature craters, just as it was for lifting the paddle and tossing it towards the water. The rent in the canoe was the only thing that seemed quite inexplicable; and, after all, it was conceivable that a sharp point had caught it when we landed. The examination I made of the shore did not assist this theory, but all the same I clung to it with that diminishing portion of my intelligence which I called my "reason." An explanation of some kind was an absolute necessity, just as some working explanation of the universe is necessary—however absurd—to the happiness of every individual who seeks to do his duty in the world and face the problems of life. The simile seemed to me at the time an exact parallel.

I at once set the pitch melting, and presently the Swede joined me at the work, though under the best conditions in the world the canoe could not be safe for traveling till the following day. I drew his attention casually to the hollows in the sand.

"Yes," he said, "I know. They're all over the island. But you can explain them, no doubt!"

"Wind, of course," I answered without hesitation. "Have you never watched those little whirlwinds in the street that twist and twirl everything into a circle? This sand's loose enough to yield, that's all."

He made no reply, and we worked on in silence for a bit. I watched him surreptitiously all the time, and I had an idea he was watching me. He seemed, too, to be always listening attentively to something I could not hear, or perhaps for something that he expected to hear, for he kept turning about and staring into the bushes, and up into the sky, and out across the water where it was visible through the openings among the willows. Sometimes he even put his hand to his ear and held it there for several minutes. He said nothing to me, however, about it, and I asked no questions. And meanwhile, as he mended that torn canoe with the skill and address of a red Indian, I was glad to notice his absorption in the work, for there was a vague dread in my heart that he would speak of the changed aspect of the willows. And, if he had noticed that, my imagination could no longer be held a sufficient explanation of it.

At length, after a long pause, he began to talk.

"Queer thing," he added in a hurried sort of voice, as though he wanted to say something and get it over. "Queer thing, I mean, about that otter last night."

V  
I had expected something so totally different that he caught me with surprise, and I looked up sharply.

"Shows how lonely this place is. Otters are awfully shy things—"

"I don't mean that, of course," he interrupted. "I mean—do you think—did you think it really was an otter?"

"What else, in the name of Heaven, what else?"

"You know, I saw it before you did, and at first it seemed—so much bigger than an otter."

"The sunset as you looked upstream magnified it, or something," I replied.

He looked at me absently a moment, as though his mind were busy with other thoughts.

"It had such extraordinary yellow eyes," he went on half to himself.

"That was the sun too," I laughed, a trifle boisterously. "I suppose you'll wonder next if that fellow in the boat—"

I suddenly decided not to finish the sentence. He was in the act again of listening, turning his head to the wind, and something in the expression of his face made me halt. The subject dropped, and we went on with our caulking. Apparently he had not noticed my unfinished sentence. Five minutes later, however, he looked at me across the canoe, the smoking pitch in his hand, his face exceedingly grave.

"I did rather wonder, if you want to know," he said slowly, "what that thing in the boat was. I remember thinking at the time it was not a man. The whole business seemed to rise quite suddenly out of the water."

I laughed again boisterously in his face, but this time there was impatience and a strain of anger too, in my feeling.

"Look here now," I cried, "this place is quite queer enough without going out of our way to imagine things! That boat was an ordinary boat, and the man in it was an ordinary man, and they were both going downstream as fast as they could lick. And that otter was an otter, so don't let's play the fool about it!"

He looked steadily at me with the same grave expression. He was not in the least annoyed. I took courage from his silence.

"And for heaven's sake," I went on, "don't keep pretending you hear things, because it only gives me the jumps, and there's nothing to hear but the river and this cursed old thundering wind."

"You fool!" he answered in a low, shocked voice, "you utter fool. That's just the way all victims talk. As if you didn't understand just as well as I do!" he sneered with scorn in his voice, and a sort of resignation. "The best thing you can do is to keep quiet and try to hold your mind as firm as possible. This feeble attempt at self-deception only makes the truth harder when you're forced to meet it."

My little effort was over, and I found nothing more to say, for I knew quite well his words were true, and that I was the fool, not he. Up to a certain stage in the adventure he kept ahead of me easily, and I think I felt annoyed to be out of it, to be thus proved less psychic, less sensitive than himself to these extraordinary happenings, and half ignorant all the time of what was going on under my very nose. He knew from the very beginning, apparently. But at the moment I wholly missed the point of his words about the necessity of there being a victim, and that we ourselves were destined to satisfy the want. I dropped all pretense thenceforward, but thenceforward likewise my fear increased steadily to the climax.

"But you're quite right about one thing," he added, before the subject passed, "and that is that we're wiser not to talk about it, or even to think about it, because what one thinks finds expression in words, and what one says, happens."

That afternoon, while the canoe dried and hardened, we spent trying to fish, testing the leak, collecting wood, and watching the enormous flood of rising water. Masses of driftwood swept near our shores sometimes, and we fished for them with long willow branches. The island grew perceptibly smaller as the banks were torn away with great gulps and splashes. The weather kept brilliantly fine till about four o'clock, and then for the first time for three days the wind showed signs of abating. Clouds began to gather in the southwest, spreading thence slowly over the sky. This lessening of the wind came as a great relief, for the incessant roaring, banging, and thundering had irritated our nerves. Yet the silence that came about five o'clock with its sudden cessation was in a manner quite as oppressive. The booming of the river had everything its own way then: it filled the air with deep murmurs, more musical than the wind noises, but infinitely more monotonous. The wind held many notes, rising, falling, always beating out some sort of great elemental tune; whereas the river's song lay between three notes at most—dull pedal notes, that held a lugubrious quality foreign to the wind, and somehow seemed to me, in my then nervous state, to sound wonderfully well the music of doom.

It was extraordinary, too, how the withdrawal suddenly of bright sunlight took everything out of the landscape that made for cheerfulness; and since this particular landscape had already managed to convey the suggestion of something sinister, the change of course was all the more unwelcome and noticeable. For me, I know, the darkening outlook became distinctly more alarming, and I found myself more than once calculating how soon after sunset the full moon would get up in the east, and whether the gathering clouds would greatly interfere with her lighting of the little island.

With this general hush of the wind—though it still indulged in occasional brief gusts—the river seemed to me to grow blacker, the willows to stand more densely together. The latter, too, kept up a sort of independent movement of their own, rustling among themselves when no wind stirred, and shaking oddly from the roots upwards. When common objects in this way become charged with the suggestion of horror, they stimulate the imagination far more than things of unusual appearance; and these bushes, crowding huddled about us, assumed for me in the darkness a bizarre grotesquerie of appearance that lent to them somehow the aspect of purposeful and living creatures. Their very ordinariness, I felt, masked what was malignant and hostile to us. The forces of the region drew nearer with the coming of night. They were focusing upon our island, and more particularly upon ourselves. For thus, somehow, in the terms of the imagination, did my really indescribable sensations in this extraordinary place present themselves.

I had slept a good deal in the early afternoon, and had thus recovered somewhat from the exhaustion of a disturbed night, but this only served apparently to render me more susceptible than before to the obsessing spell of the haunting. I fought

against it, laughing at my feelings as absurd and childish, with very obvious physiological explanations, yet, in spite of every effort, they gained in strength upon me so that I dreaded the night as a child lost in a forest must dread the approach of darkness.

The canoe we had carefully covered with a waterproof sheet during the day, and the one remaining paddle had been securely tied by the Swede to the base of a tree, lest the wind should rob us of that too. From five o'clock onwards I busied myself with the stew-pot and preparations for dinner, it being my turn to cook that night. We had potatoes, onions, bits of bacon fat to add flavour, and a general thick residue from former stews at the bottom of the pot; with black bread broken up into it the result was most excellent, and it was followed by a stew of plums with sugar and a brew of strong tea with dried milk. A good pile of wood lay close at hand, and the absence of wind made my duties easy. My companion sat lazily watching me, dividing his attentions between cleaning his pipe and giving useless advice—an admitted privilege of the off-duty man. He had been very quiet all the afternoon, engaged in re-caulking the canoe, strengthening the tent ropes, and fishing for driftwood while I slept. No more talk about undesirable things had passed between us, and I think his only remarks had to do with the gradual destruction of the island, which he declared was now fully a third smaller than when we first landed.

The pot had just begun to bubble when I heard his voice calling to me from the bank, where he had wandered away without my noticing. I ran up.

"Come and listen," he said, "and see what you make of it." He held his hand cupwise to his ear, as so often before.

"Now do you hear anything?" he asked, watching me curiously.

We stood there, listening attentively together. At first I heard only the deep note of the water and the hissings rising from its turbulent surface. The willows, for once, were motionless and silent. Then a sound began to reach my ears faintly, a peculiar sound—something like the humming of a distant gong. It seemed to come across to us in the darkness from the waste of swamps and willows opposite. It was repeated at regular intervals, but it was certainly neither the sound of a bell nor the hooting of a distant steamer. I can liken it to nothing so much as to the sound of an immense gong, suspended far up in the sky, repeating incessantly its muffled metallic note, soft and musical, as it was repeatedly struck. My heart quickened as I listened.

"I've heard it all day," said my companion. "While you slept this afternoon it came all round the island. I hunted it down, but could never get near enough to see—to localize it correctly. Sometimes it was overhead, and sometimes it seemed under the water. Once or twice, too, I could have sworn it was not outside at all, but within myself—you know—the way a sound in the fourth dimension is supposed to come."

I was too much puzzled to pay much attention to his words. I listened carefully, striving to associate it with any known familiar sound I could think of, but without success. It changed in direction, too, coming nearer, and then sinking utterly away into remote distance. I cannot say that it was ominous in quality, because to me it seemed distinctly musical, yet I must admit it set going a distressing feeling that made me wish I had never heard it.

"The wind blowing in those sand-funnels," I said, determined to find an explanation, "or the bushes rubbing together after the storm perhaps."

"It comes off the whole swamp," my friend answered. "It comes from everywhere at once." He ignored my explanations. "It comes from the willow bushes somehow——"

"But now the wind has dropped," I objected. "The willows can hardly make a noise by themselves, can they?"

His answer frightened me, first because I had dreaded it, and secondly, because I knew intuitively it was true.

"It is because the wind has dropped we now hear it. It was drowned before. It is the cry, I believe of the——"

I dashed back to my fire, warned by a sound of bubbling that the stew was in danger, but determined at the same time to escape from further conversation. I was resolute, if possible, to avoid the exchanging of views. I dreaded, too, that he would begin again about the gods, or the elemental forces, or something else disquieting, and I wanted to keep myself well in hand for what might happen later. There was another night to be faced before we escaped from this distressing place, and there was no knowing yet what it might bring forth.

"Come and cut up bread for the pot," I called to him, vigorously stirring the appetizing mixture. That stew-pot held sanity for us

both, and the thought made me laugh.

He came over slowly and took the provision sack from the tree, fumbling in its mysterious depths, and then emptying the entire contents upon the ground-sheet at his feet.

"Hurry up!" I cried; "it's boiling."

The Swede burst out into a roar of laughter that startled me. It was forced laughter, not artificial exactly, but mirthless.

"There's nothing here!" he shouted, holding his sides.

"Bread, I mean."

"It's gone. There is no bread. They've taken it!"

I dropped the long spoon and ran up. Everything the sack had contained lay upon the ground-sheet, but there was no loaf.

The whole dead weight of my growing fear fell upon me and shook me. Then I burst out laughing too. It was the only thing to do: and the sound of my own laughter also made me understand his. The strain of psychical pressure caused it—this explosion of unnatural laughter in both of us; it was an effort of repressed forces to seek relief; it was a temporary safety valve. And with both of us it ceased quite suddenly.

"How criminally stupid of me!" I cried, still determined to be consistent and find an explanation. "I clean forgot to buy a loaf at Pressburg. That chattering woman put everything out of my head, and I must have left it lying on the counter or——"

"The oatmeal, too, is much less than it was this morning," the Swede interrupted.

Why in the world need he draw attention to it? I thought angrily.

"There's enough for to-morrow," I said, stirring vigorously, "and we can get lots more at Komorn or Gran. In twenty-four hours we shall be miles from here."

"I hope so—to God," he muttered, putting the things back into the sack, "unless we're claimed first as victims for the sacrifice," he added with a foolish laugh. He dragged the sack into the tent, for safety's sake, I suppose, and I heard him mumbling on to himself, but so indistinctly that it seemed quite natural for me to ignore his words.

Our meal was beyond question a gloomy one, and we ate it almost in silence, avoiding one another's eyes, and keeping the fire bright. Then we washed up and prepared for the night, and, once smoking, our minds unoccupied with any definite duties, the apprehension I had felt all day long became more and more acute. It was not then active fear, I think, but the very vagueness of its origin distressed me far more than if I had been able to ticket and face it squarely. The curious sound I have likened to the note of a gong became now almost incessant, and filled the stillness of the night with a faint, continuous ringing rather than a series of distinct notes. At one time it was behind and at another time in front of us. Sometimes I fancied it came from the bushes on our left, and then again from the clumps on our right. More often it hovered directly overhead like the whirring of wings. It was really everywhere at once, behind, in front, at our sides and over our heads, completely surrounding us. The sound really defies description. But nothing within my knowledge is like that ceaseless muffled humming rising off the deserted world of swamps and willows.

We sat smoking in comparative silence, the strain growing every minute greater. The worst feature of the situation seemed to me that we did not know what to expect, and could therefore make no sort of preparation by way of defense. We could anticipate nothing. My explanations made in the sunshine, moreover, now came to haunt me with their foolish and wholly unsatisfactory nature, and it was more and more clear to me that some kind of plain talk with my companion was inevitable, whether I liked it or not. After all, we had to spend the night together, and to sleep in the same tent side by side. I saw that I could not get along much longer without the support of his mind, and for that, of course, plain talk was imperative. As long as possible, however, I postponed this little climax, and tried to ignore or laugh at the occasional sentences he flung into the emptiness.

Some of these sentences, moreover, were confoundingly disquieting to me, coming as they did to corroborate much that I felt myself: corroboration, too—which made it so much more convincing—from a totally different point of view. He composed such curious sentences, and hurled them at me in such an inconsequential sort of way, as though his main line of thought was secret to himself, and these fragments were the bits he found it impossible to digest. He got rid of them by uttering them. Speech relieved him. It was like being sick.

"There are things about us, I'm sure, that make for disorder, disintegration, destruction, our destruction," he said once, while

the fire blazed between us. "We've strayed out of a safe line somewhere."

And another time, when the gong sounds had come nearer, ringing much louder than before, and directly over our heads, he said, as though talking to himself: "I don't think a phonograph would show any record of that. The sound doesn't come to me by the ears at all. The vibrations reach me in another manner altogether, and seem to be within me, which is precisely how a fourth dimension sound might be supposed to make itself heard."

I purposely made no reply to this, but I sat up a little closer to the fire and peered about me into the darkness. The clouds were massed all over the sky and no trace of moonlight came through. Very still, too, everything was, so that the river and the frogs had things all their own way.

"It has that about it," he went on, "which is utterly out of common experience. It is unknown. Only one thing describes it really: it is a non-human sound; I mean a sound outside humanity."

Having rid himself of this indigestible morsel, he lay quiet for a time; but he had so admirably expressed my own feeling that it was a relief to have the thought out, and to have confined it by the limitation of words from dangerous wandering to and fro in the mind.

The solitude of that Danube camping-place, can I ever forget it? The feeling of being utterly alone on an empty planet! My thoughts ran incessantly upon cities and the haunts of men. I would have given my soul, as the saying is, for the "feel" of those Bavarian villages we had passed through by the score; for the normal, human commonplaces, peasants drinking beer, tables beneath the trees, hot sunshine, and a ruined castle on the rocks behind the red-roofed church. Even the tourists would have been welcome.

Yet what I felt of dread was no ordinary ghostly fear. It was infinitely greater, stranger, and seemed to arise from some dim ancestral sense of terror more profoundly disturbing than anything I had known or dreamed of. We had "strayed," as the Swede put it, into some region or some set of conditions where the risks were great, yet unintelligible to us; where the frontiers of some unknown world lay close about us. It was a spot held by the dwellers in some outer space, a sort of peephole whence they could spy upon the earth, themselves unseen, a point where the veil between had worn a little thin. As the final result of too long a sojourn here, we should be carried over the border and deprived of what we called "our lives," yet by mental, not physical, processes. In that sense, as he said, we should be the victims of our adventure—a sacrifice.

It took us in different fashion, each according to the measure of his sensitiveness and powers of resistance. I translated it vaguely into a personification of the mightily disturbed elements, investing them with the horror of a deliberate and malefic purpose, resentful of our audacious intrusion into their breeding-place; whereas my friend threw it into the unoriginal form at first of a trespass on some ancient shrine, some place where the old gods still held sway, where the emotional forces of former worshipers still clung, and the ancestral portion of him yielded to the old pagan spell.

At any rate, here was a place unpolluted by men, kept clean by the winds from coarsening human influences, a place where spiritual agencies were within reach and aggressive. Never, before or since, have I been so attacked by indescribable suggestions of a "beyond region," of another scheme of life, another evolution not parallel to the human. And in the end our minds would succumb under the weight of the awful spell, and we should be drawn across the frontier into their world.

Small things testified to this amazing influence of the place, and now in the silence round the fire they allowed themselves to be noted by the mind. The very atmosphere had proved itself a magnifying medium to distort every indication: the otter rolling in the current, the hurrying boatman making signs, the shifting willows, one and all had been robbed of its natural character, and revealed in something of its other aspect—as it existed across the border in that other region. And this changed aspect I felt was new not merely to me, but to the race. The whole experience whose verge we touched was unknown to humanity at all. It was a new order of experience, and in the true sense of the word unearthly.

"It's the deliberate, calculating purpose that reduces one's courage to zero," the Swede said suddenly, as if he had been actually following my thoughts. "Otherwise imagination might count for much. But the paddle, the canoe, the lessening food —"

"Haven't I explained all that once?" I interrupted viciously. "You have," he answered dryly; "you have indeed."

He made other remarks too, as usual, about what he called the "plain determination to provide a victim"; but, having now arranged my thoughts better, I recognized that this was simply the cry of his frightened soul against the knowledge that he was being attacked in a vital part, and that he would be somehow taken or destroyed. The situation called for a courage and calmness of reasoning that neither of us could compass, and I have never before been so clearly conscious of two persons in me—the one that explained everything, and the other that laughed at such foolish explanations, yet was horribly afraid.

Meanwhile, in the pitchy night the fire died down and the woodpile grew small. Neither of us moved to replenish the stock, and the darkness consequently came up very close to our faces. A few feet beyond the circle of firelight it was inky black. Occasionally a stray puff of wind set the billows shivering about us, but apart from this not very welcome sound a deep and depressing silence reigned, broken only by the gurgling of the river and the humming in the air overhead.

We both missed, I think, the shouting company of the winds. At length, at a moment when a stray puff prolonged itself as though the wind were about to rise again, I reached the point for me of saturation, the point where it was absolutely necessary to find relief in plain speech, or else to betray myself by some hysterical extravagance that must have been far worse in its effect upon both of us. I kicked the fire into a blaze, and turned to my companion abruptly. He looked up with a start.

"I can't disguise it any longer," I said; "I don't like this place, and the darkness, and the noises, and the awful feelings I get. There's something here that beats me utterly. I'm in a blue funk, and that's the plain truth. If the other shore was—different, I swear I'd be inclined to swim for it!"

The Swede's face turned very white beneath the deep tan of sun and wind. He stared straight at me and answered quietly, but his voice betrayed his huge excitement by its unnatural calmness. For the moment, at any rate, he was the strong man of the two. He was more phlegmatic, for one thing.

"It's not a physical condition we can escape from by running away," he replied, in the tone of a doctor diagnosing some grave disease; "we must sit tight and wait. There are forces close here that could kill a herd of elephants in a second as easily as you or I could squash a fly. Our only chance is to keep perfectly still. Our insignificance perhaps may save us."

I put a dozen questions into my expression of face, but found no words. It was precisely like listening to an accurate description of a disease whose symptoms had puzzled me.

"I mean that so far, although aware of our disturbing presence, they have not found us—not 'located' us, as the Americans say," he went on. "They're blundering about like men hunting for a leak of gas. The paddle and canoe and provisions prove that. I think they feel us, but cannot actually see us. We must keep our minds quiet—it's our minds they feel. We must control our thoughts, or it's all up with us."

"Death you mean?" I stammered, icy with the horror of his suggestion.

"Worse—by far," he said. "Death, according to one's belief, means either annihilation or release from the limitations of the senses, but it involves no change of character. You don't suddenly alter just because the body's gone. But this means a radical alteration, a complete change, a horrible loss of oneself by substitution—far worse than death, and not even annihilation. We happen to have camped in a spot where their region touches ours where the veil between has worn thin"—horrors! he was using my very own phrase, my actual words—"so that they are aware of our being in their neighborhood."

"But who are aware?" I asked.

I forgot the shaking of the willows in the windless calm, the humming overhead, everything except that I was waiting for an answer that I dreaded more than I can possibly explain. He lowered his voice at once to reply, leaning forward a little over the fire, an indefinable change in his face that made me avoid his eyes and look down upon the ground.

"All my life," he said, "I have been strangely, vividly conscious of another region—not far removed from our own world in one sense, yet wholly different in kind—where great things go on unceasingly, where immense and terrible personalities hurry by, intent on vast purposes compared to which earthly affairs, the rise and fall of nations, the destinies of empires, the fate of armies and continents, are all as dust in the balance; vast purposes, I mean, that deal directly with the soul, and not indirectly with

mere expressions of the soul—"

"I suggest just now—" I began, seeking to stop him, feeling as though I was face to face with a madman. But he instantly overbore me with his torrent that had to come.

"You think," he said, "it is the spirits of the elements, and I thought perhaps it was the old gods. But I tell you now it is—neither.

These would be comprehensible entities, for they have relations with men, depending upon them for worship or sacrifice, whereas these beings who are now about us have absolutely nothing to do with mankind, and it is mere chance that their space happens just at this spot to touch our own."

The mere conception, which his words somehow made so convincing, as I listened to them there in the dark stillness of that lonely island, set me shaking a little all over. I found it impossible to control my movements.

"And what do you propose?" I began again.

"A sacrifice, a victim, might save us by distracting them until we could get away," he went on, "just as the wolves stop to devour the dogs and give the sleigh another start. But—I see no chance of any other victim now."

I stared blankly at him. The gleam in his eyes was dreadful. Presently he continued.

"It's the willows, of course. The willows mask the others, but the others are feeling about for us. If we let our minds betray our fear, we're lost, lost utterly." He looked at me with an expression so calm, so determined, so sincere, that I no longer had any doubts as to his sanity. He was as sane as any man ever was. "If we can hold out through the night," he added, "we may get off in the daylight unnoticed, or rather, undiscovered."

"But you really think a sacrifice would—"

That gong-like humming came down very close over our heads as I spoke, but it was my friend's scared face that really stopped my mouth.

"Hush!" he whispered, holding up his hand. "Do not mention them more than you can help. Do not refer to them by name. To name is to reveal: it is the inevitable clue, and our only hope lies in ignoring them, in order that they may ignore us."

"Even in thought?" He was extraordinarily agitated.

"Especially in thought. Our thoughts make spirals in their world. We must keep them out of our minds at all costs if possible."

I raked the fire together to prevent the darkness having everything its own way. I never longed for the sun as I longed for it then in the awful blackness of that summer night.

"Were you awake all last night?" he went on suddenly.

"I slept badly a little after dawn," I replied evasively, trying to follow his instructions, which I knew instinctively were true, "but the wind, of course—"

"I know. But the wind won't account for all the noises."

"Then you heard it too?"

"The multiplying countless little footsteps I heard," he said, adding, after a moment's hesitation, "and that other sound—"

"You mean above the tent, and the pressing down upon us of something tremendous, gigantic?"

He nodded significantly.

"It was like the beginning of a sort of inner suffocation?" I said.

"Partly, yes. It seemed to me that the weight of the atmosphere had been altered—had increased enormously, so that we should be crushed."

"And that," I went on, determined to have it all out, pointing upwards where the gong-like note hummed ceaselessly, rising and falling like wind. "What do you make of that?"

"It's their sound," he whispered gravely. "It's the sound of their world, the humming in their region. The division here is so thin that it leaks through somehow. But, if you listen carefully, you'll find it's not above so much as around us. It's in the willows. It's the willows themselves humming, because here the willows have been made symbols of the forces that are against us."

I could not follow exactly what he meant by this, yet the thought and idea in my mind were beyond question the thought and idea in his. I realized what he realized, only with less power of analysis than his. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him at last about my hallucination of the ascending figures and the moving bushes, when he suddenly thrust his face again close into mine across the firelight and began to speak in a very earnest whisper. He amazed me by his calmness and pluck, his apparent control of the situation. This man I had for years deemed unimaginative, stolid!

"Now listen," he said. "The only thing for us to do is to go on as though nothing had happened, follow our usual habits, go to bed,

and so forth; pretend we feel nothing and notice nothing. It is a question wholly of the mind, and the less we think about them the better our chance of escape. Above all, don't think, for what you think happens!"

"All right," I managed to reply, simply breathless with his words and the strangeness of it all; "all right, I'll try, but tell me one thing more first. Tell me what you make of those hollows in the ground all about us, those sand-funnels?"

"No!" he cried, forgetting to whisper in his excitement. "I dare not, simply dare not, put the thought into words. If you have not guessed I am glad. Don't try to. They have put it into my mind; try your hardest to prevent their putting it into yours."

He sank his voice again to a whisper before he finished, and I did not press him to explain. There was already just about as much horror in me as I could hold. The conversation came to an end, and we smoked our pipes busily in silence.

Then something happened, something unimportant apparently, as the way is when the nerves are in a very great state of tension, and this small thing for a brief space gave me an entirely different point of view. I chanced to look down at my sand-shoe—the sort we used for the canoe—and something to do with the hole at the toe suddenly recalled to me the London shop where I had bought them, the difficulty the man had in fitting me, and other details of the uninteresting but practical operation. At once, in its train, followed a wholesome view of the modern skeptical world I was accustomed to move in at home. I thought of roast beef and ale, motor-cars, policemen, brass bands, and a dozen other things that proclaimed the soul of ordinariness or utility. The effect was immediate and astonishing even to myself. Psychologically, I suppose, it was simply a sudden and violent reaction after the strain of living in an atmosphere of things that to the normal consciousness must seem impossible and incredible. But, whatever the cause, it momentarily lifted the spell from my heart, and left me for the short space of a minute feeling free and utterly unafraid. I looked up at my friend opposite.

"You damned old pagan!" I cried, laughing aloud in his face.

"You imaginative idiot! You superstitious idolator! You—"

I stopped in the middle, seized anew by the old horror. I tried to smother the sound of my voice as something sacrilegious. The Swede, of course, heard it too—that strange cry overhead in the darkness—and that sudden drop in the air as though something had come nearer.

He had turned ashen white under the tan. He stood bolt upright in front of the fire, stiff as a rod, staring at me.

"After that," he said in a sort of helpless, frantic way, "we must go! We can't stay now; we must strike camp this very instant and go on—down the river."

He was talking, I saw, quite wildly, his words dictated by abject terror—the terror he had resisted so long, but which had caught him at last.

"In the dark?" I exclaimed, shaking with fear after my hysterical outburst, but still realizing our position better than he did. "Sheer madness! The river's in flood, and we've only got a single paddle. Besides, we only go deeper into their country! There's nothing ahead for fifty miles but willows, willows, willows!"

He sat down again in a state of semi-collapse. The positions, by one of those kaleidoscopic changes nature loves, were suddenly reversed, and the control of our forces passed over into my hands. His mind at last had reached the point where it was beginning to weaken.

"What on earth possessed you to do such a thing?" he whispered, with the awe of genuine terror in his voice and face.

I crossed round to his side of the fire. I took both his hands in mine, kneeling down beside him and looking straight into his frightened eyes.

"We'll make one more blaze," I said firmly, "and then turn in for the night. At sunrise we'll be off full speed for Komorn. Now, pull yourself together a bit, and remember your own advice about not thinking fear!"

He said no more, and I saw that he would agree and obey. In some measure, too, it was a sort of relief to get up and make an excursion into the darkness for more wood. We kept close together, almost touching, groping among the bushes and along the bank. The humming overhead never ceased, but seemed to me to grow louder as we increased our distance from the fire. It was shivery work!

We were grubbing away in the middle of a thickish clump of willows where some driftwood from a former flood had caught high among the branches, when my body was seized in a grip that made me half drop upon the sand. It was the Swede. He had

fallen against me, and was clutching me for support. I heard his breath coming and going in short gasps.

"Look! By my soul!" he whispered, and for the first time in my experience I knew what it was to hear tears of terror in a human voice. He was pointing to the fire, some fifty feet away. I followed the direction of his finger, and I swear my heart missed a beat.

There, in front of the dim glow, something was moving. I saw it through a veil that hung before my eyes like the gauze drop-curtain used at the back of a theater—hazily a little. It was neither a human figure nor an animal. To me it gave the strange impression of being as large as several animals grouped together, like horses, two or three, moving slowly. The Swede, too, got a similar result, though expressing it differently, for he thought it was shaped and sized like a clump of willow bushes, rounded at the top, and moving all over upon its surface—"coiling upon itself like smoke," he said afterwards.

"I watched it settle downwards through the bushes," he sobbed at me. "Look, by God! It's coming this way! Oh, oh!"—he gave a kind of whistling cry. "They've found us."

I gave one terrified glance, which just enabled me to see that the shadowy form was swinging towards us through the bushes, and then I collapsed backwards with a crash into the branches. These failed, of course, to support my weight, so that with the Swede on the top of me we fell in a struggling heap upon the sand. I really hardly knew what was happening. I was conscious only of a sort of enveloping sensation of icy fear that plucked the nerves out of their fleshly covering, twisted them this way and that, and replaced them quivering. My eyes were tightly shut; something in my throat choked me; a feeling that my consciousness was expanding, extending out into space, swiftly gave way to another feeling that I was losing it altogether, and about to die.

An acute spasm of pain passed through me, and I was aware that the Swede had hold of me in such a way that he hurt me abominably. It was the way he caught at me in falling.

But it was this pain, he declared afterwards, that saved me: it caused me to forget them and think of something else at the very instant when they were about to find me. It concealed my mind from them at the moment of discovery, yet just in time to evade their terrible seizing of me. He himself, he says, actually swooned at the same moment, and that was what saved him.

I only know that at a later time, how long or short is impossible to say, I found myself scrambling up out of the slippery network of willow branches, and saw my companion standing in front of me holding out a hand to assist me. I stared at him in a dazed way, rubbing the arm he had twisted for me. Nothing came to me to say, somehow.

"I lost consciousness for a moment or two," I heard him say. "That's what saved me. It made me stop thinking about them."

"You nearly broke my arm in two," I said, uttering my only connected thought at the moment. A numbness came over me.

"That's what saved you!" he replied. "Between us, we've managed to set them off on a false tack somewhere. The humming has ceased. It's gone—for the moment at any rate!"

A wave of hysterical laughter seized me again, and this time spread to my friend too—great healing gusts of shaking laughter that brought a tremendous sense of relief in their train. We made our way back to the fire and put the wood on so that it blazed at once. Then we saw that the tent had fallen over and lay in a tangled heap upon the ground.

We picked it up, and during the process tripped more than once and caught our feet in sand.

"It's those sand-funnels," exclaimed the Swede, when the tent was up again and the firelight lit up the ground for several yards about us. "And look at the size of them!"

All round the tent and about the fireplace where we had seen the moving shadows there were deep funnel-shaped hollows in the sand, exactly similar to the ones we had already found over the island, only far bigger and deeper, beautifully formed, and wide enough in some instances to admit the whole of my foot and leg.

Neither of us said a word. We both knew that sleep was the safest thing we could do, and to bed we went accordingly without further delay, having first thrown sand on the fire and taken the provision sack and the paddle inside the tent with us. The canoe, too, we propped in such a way at the end of the tent that our feet touched it, and the least motion would disturb and wake us.

In case of emergency, too, we again went to bed in our clothes, ready for a sudden start.

V

It was my firm intention to lie awake all night and watch, but the exhaustion of nerves and body decreed otherwise, and sleep after a while came over me with a welcome blanket of oblivion. The fact that my companion also slept quickened its approach. At first he fidgeted and constantly sat up, asking me if I "heard this" or "heard that." He tossed about on his cork mattress, and said the tent was moving and the river had risen over the point of the island; but each time I went out to look I returned with the report that all was well, and finally he grew calmer and lay still. Then at length his breathing became regular and I heard unmistakable sounds of snoring—the first and only time in my life when snoring has been a welcome and calming influence.

This, I remember, was the last thought in my mind before dozing off.

A difficulty in breathing woke me, and I found the blanket over my face. But something else besides the blanket was pressing upon me, and my first thought was that my companion had rolled off his mattress on to my own in his sleep. I called to him and sat up, and at the same moment it came to me that the tent was surrounded. That sound of multitudinous soft pattering was again audible outside, filling the night with horror.

I called again to him, louder than before. He did not answer, but I missed the sound of his snoring, and also noticed that the flap of the tent door was down. This was the unpardonable sin. I crawled out in the darkness to hook it back securely, and it was then for the first time I realized positively that the Swede was not there. He had gone.

I dashed out in a mad run, seized by a dreadful agitation, and the moment I was out I plunged into a sort of torrent of humming that surrounded me completely and came out of every quarter of the heavens at once. It was that same familiar humming—gone mad! A swarm of great invisible bees might have been about me in the air. The sound seemed to thicken the very atmosphere, and I felt that my lungs worked with difficulty.

But my friend was in danger, and I could not hesitate.

The dawn was just about to break, and a faint whitish light spread upwards over the clouds from a thin strip of clear horizon. No wind stirred. I could just make out the bushes and river beyond, and the pale sandy patches. In my excitement I ran frantically to and fro about the island, calling him by name, shouting at the top of my voice the first words that came into my head. But the willows smothered my voice, and the humming muffled it, so that the sound only traveled a few feet round me. I plunged among the bushes, tripping headlong, tumbling over roots, and scraping my face as I tore this way and that among the preventing branches.

Then, quite unexpectedly, I came out upon the island's point and saw a dark figure outlined between the water and the sky. It was the Swede. And already he had one foot in the river! A moment more and he would have taken the plunge.

I threw myself upon him, flinging my arms about his waist and dragging him shorewards with all my strength. Of course he struggled furiously, making a noise all the time just like that cursed humming, and using the most outlandish phrases in his anger about "going inside to Them," and "taking the way of the water and the wind," and God only knows what more besides, that I tried in vain to recall afterwards, but which turned me sick with horror and amazement as I listened. But in the end I managed to get him into the comparative safety of the tent, and flung him breathless and cursing upon the mattress, where I held him until the fit had passed.

I think the suddenness with which it all went and he grew calm, coinciding as it did with the equally abrupt cessation of the humming and pattering outside—I think this was almost the strangest part of the whole business perhaps. For he just opened his eyes and turned his tired face up to me so that the dawn threw a pale light upon it through the doorway, and said, for all the world just like a frightened child:

"My life, old man—it's my life I owe you. But it's all over now anyhow. They've found a victim in our place!"

Then he dropped back upon his blankets and went to sleep literally under my eyes. He simply collapsed, and began to snore again as healthily as though nothing had happened and he had never tried to offer his own life as a sacrifice by drowning. And when the sunlight woke him three hours later—hours of ceaseless vigil for me—it became so clear to me that he remembered absolutely nothing of what he had attempted to do, that I deemed it wise to hold my peace and ask no dangerous questions.

He woke naturally and easily, as I have said, when the sun was

already high in a windless hot sky, and he at once got up and set about the preparation of the fire for breakfast. I followed him anxiously at bathing, but he did not attempt to plunge in, merely dipping his head and making some remark about the extra coldness of the water.

"River's falling at last," he said, "and I'm glad of it."

"The humming has stopped too," I said.

He looked up at me quietly with his normal expression. Evidently he remembered everything except his own attempt at suicide.

"Everything has stopped," he said, "because——"

He hesitated. But I knew some reference to that remark he had made just before he fainted was in his mind, and I was determined to know it.

"Because 'They've found another victim?'" I said, forcing a little laugh.

"Exactly," he answered, "exactly! I feel as positive of it as though—as though—I feel quite safe again, I mean," he finished. He began to look curiously about him. The sunlight lay in hot patches on the sand. There was no wind. The willows were motionless. He slowly rose to feet.

"Come," he said; "I think if we look, we shall find it."

He started off on a run, and I followed him. He kept to the banks, poking with a stick among the sandy bays and caves and little back-waters, myself always close on his heels.

"Ah!" he exclaimed presently, "ah!"

The tone of his voice somehow brought back to me a vivid sense of the horror of the last twenty-four hours, and I hurried up to join him. He was pointing with his stick at a large black object that lay half in the water and half on the sand. It appeared to be caught by some twisted willow roots so that the river could not sweep it away. A few hours before the spot must have been under water.

"See," he said quietly, "the victim that made our escape possible!"

And when I peered across his shoulder I saw that his stick rested on the body of a man. He turned it over. It was the corpse of a peasant, and the face was hidden in the sand. Clearly the man had been drowned but a few hours before, and his body must have been swept down upon our island somewhere about the hour of the dawn—at the very time the fit had passed.

"We must give it a decent burial, you know."

"I suppose so," I replied. I shuddered a little in spite of myself, for there was something about the appearance of that poor drowned man that turned me cold.

The Swede glanced up sharply at me, and began clambering down the bank. I followed him more leisurely. The current, I noticed, had torn away much of the clothing from the body, so that the neck and part of the chest lay bare.

Halfway down the bank my companion suddenly stopped and held up his hand in warning; but either my foot slipped, or I had gained too much momentum to bring myself quickly to a halt, for I bumped into him and sent him forward with a sort of leap to save himself. We tumbled together on to the hard sand so that our feet splashed into the water. And, before anything could be done, we had collided a little heavily against the corpse.

The Swede uttered a sharp cry. And I sprang back as if I had been shot.

At the moment we touched the body there arose from its surface the loud sound of humming—the sound of several hummings—which passed with a vast commotion as of winged things in the air about us and disappeared upwards into the sky, growing fainter and fainter till they finally ceased in the distance. It was exactly as though we had disturbed some living yet invisible creatures at work.

My companion clutched me, and I think I clutched him, but before either of us had time properly to recover from the unexpected shock, we saw that a movement of the current was turning the corpse round so that it became released from the grip of the willow roots. A moment later it had turned completely over, the dead face uppermost, staring at the sky. It lay on the edge of the main stream. In another moment it would be swept away.

The Swede started to save it, shouting again something I did not catch about a "proper burial" and then abruptly dropped upon his knees on the sand and covered his eyes with his hands. I was beside him in an instant.

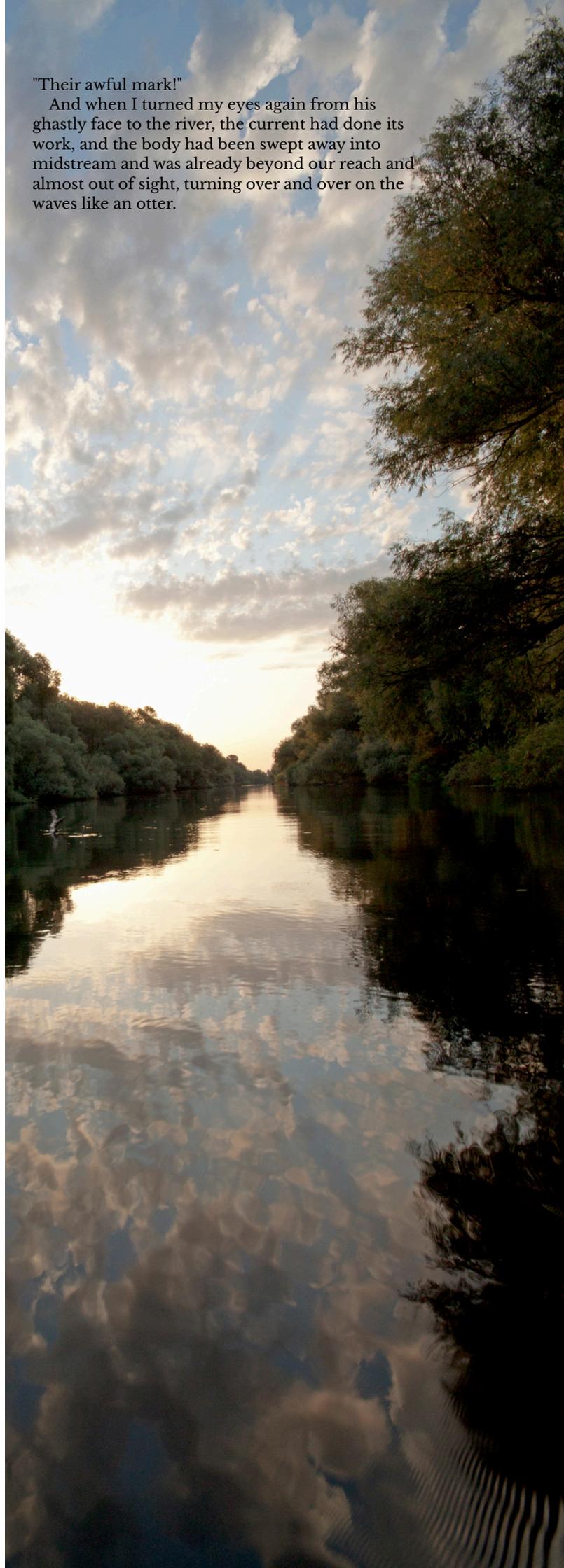
I saw what he had seen.

For just as the body swung round to the current the face and the exposed chest turned full towards us, and showed plainly how the skin and flesh were indented with small hollows, beautifully formed, and exactly similar in shape and kind to the sand-funnels that we had found all over the island.

"Their mark!" I heard my companion mutter under his breath.

"Their awful mark!"

And when I turned my eyes again from his ghastly face to the river, the current had done its work, and the body had been swept away into midstream and was already beyond our reach and almost out of sight, turning over and over on the waves like an otter.



# THE FORLORN SHEPHERD'S COMPLAINT

Thomas Hood

"Vell! Here I am—no Matter how it suits  
A-keeping Company with them dumb Brutes;  
Old Park vos no bad Judge—confound his vig!  
Of vot vood break the Sperrit of a Prig!  
"The Like of Me, to come to New Sow Wales  
To go a-tagging arter Vethers' Tails  
And valk in Herbage as delights the Flock,  
But stinks of Sweet Herbs vorser nor the Dock!  
"To go to set this solitary Job  
To Von whose Vork vos alvay in a Mob!  
It's out of all our Lines, for sure I am  
Jack Shepherd even never kep a Lamb!  
"I arn't ashamed to say I sit and veep  
To think of Seven Year of keepin Sheep,  
The spooniest Beast in Nater, all to Sticks,  
And not a Votch to take for all their Ticks!  
"If I'd fore-seed how Transports vould turn out  
To only Baa! and Botanize about,  
I'd quite as leaf have had the t'other Pull,  
And come to Cotton, as to all this Vool!  
"Von only happy moment I have had  
Since here I come to be a Farmer's Cad,  
And then I cotch'd a vild Beast in a Snooze,  
And pick'd her pouch of three young Kangaroos!  
"Vot chance haye I to go to Race or Mill?  
Or show a sneaking Kindness for a Till;  
And as for Vashings, on a hedge to dry,  
I'd put the Natives' Linen in my Eye!  
"If this whole Lot of Mutton I could scrag,  
And find a Fence to turn it into Swag,  
I'd give it all in London Streets to stand,  
And if I had my pick, I'd say the Strand!  
"But ven I goes, as maybe vonce I shall,  
To my old Crib to meet with Jack, and Sal,  
I've been so gallows honest in this Place,  
I shan't not like to show my sheepish Face.  
"It's wery hard for nothing but a Box  
Of Irish Blackguard to be keepin' Flocks,  
'Mong naked Blacks, sich Savages to hus,  
They've nayther got a Pocket nor a Pus.  
"But folks may tell their Troubles till they're sick  
To dumb brute Beasts,—and so I'll cut my Stick!  
And vot's the Use a Feller's Eyes to pipe  
Vere von can't borrow any Gemman's Vipe?"





corncrakemag.com

X: @corncrakemag

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