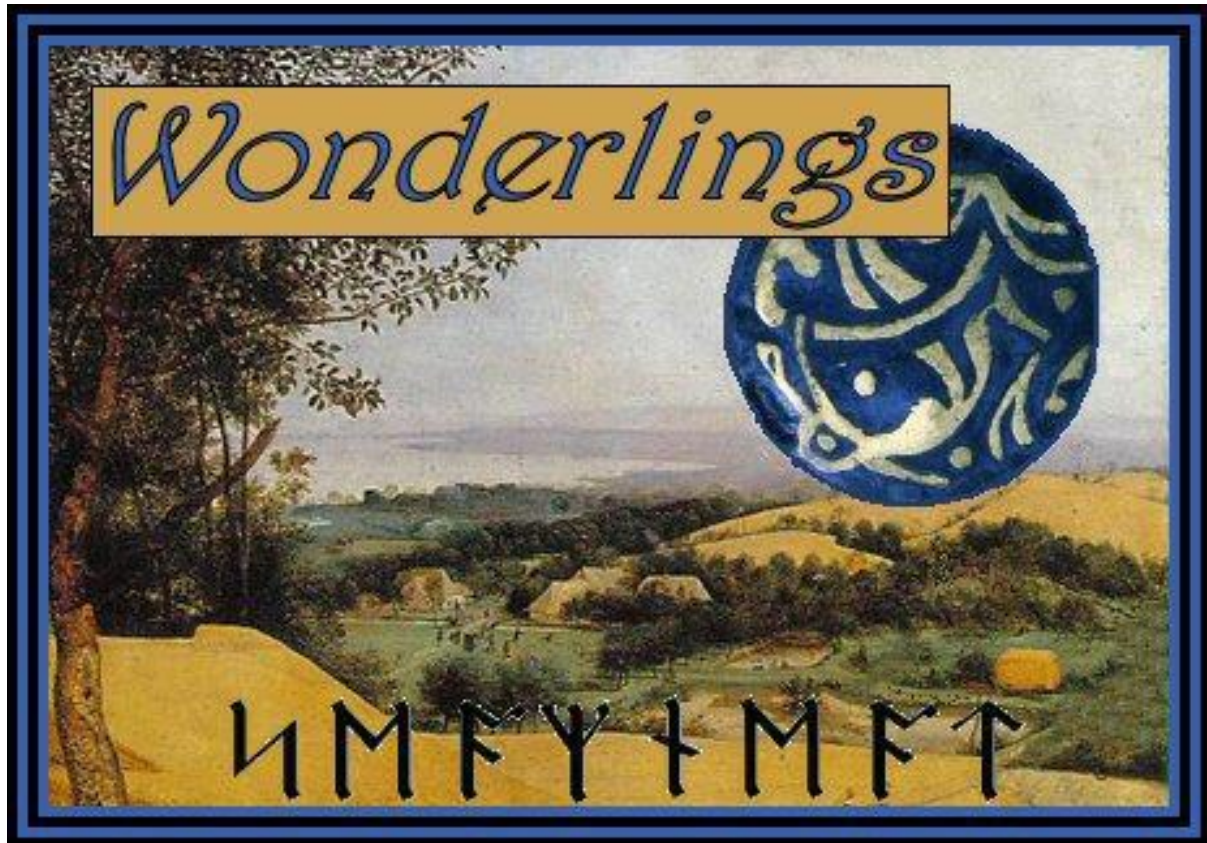




All unexpectedly, from Beauchamps's left, a huge horse, as big as any milkman's carthorse, cleared the hedge. The rider of this massive horse was a large man in a hooded cape, who bore his round black shield strapped on his right forearm. Arthur stood, shocked, hearing a mirthless roar of laughter emanating from the unknown warrior. It was the black shield which the rider used to dash against the side of Beauchamps's head, felling him where he stood, not two yards from Reg's front gate.

Late in 1995, well-known media baron, Lord Barclay, with two other gentlemen, presented three gold pins to the British Museum. The pins, each approximately 10 cm in length and exquisitely engraved, are considered to be some of the finest examples of Jutish craftsmanship in existence and are believed to date from the 7th century.

Professor John Dimblethwaite, curator of the Anglo-Saxon collection at the museum, regards the finding of these treasures as a major discovery. It has not yet been revealed how Lord Barclay came by the pins, which were probably intended for use in securing garments.

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER I

London, 1945.

The young man woke to find himself sitting up awkwardly in his very rumpled bed. He was sweating profusely, appalled by something. Another bloke watched him, owlshly.

"Good God, man! Are you having a nightmare?"

"What?"

"You were bellowing in your sleep. And I believe I heard you call out last night, as well. I say, you're not taking hallucinogenic drugs, are you?"

The bloke held his head in his hands, trying desperately to register conscious thought.

"No. I mean, no ... no drugs. But I have this bloody dream lately. Scares the hell out of me."

"Oh? What's it about? ... Come on, I'm not afraid to discuss dreams."

The bloke was distressed and continued to nurse his troubled head. He managed to mutter: "There's a girl. I can't remember who she is. I'm rescuing somebody, and somehow I manage to save them from something quite terrible. And then ..."

"I know", the other man grinned. "She is eternally grateful. And then she showers you with favours of a *lustful* kind."

The bloke stared uncomprehendingly at the opposite wall. The man's voice sounded lame: "No. No ... and then I wake up ..."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"Name, rank and serial number?"

"Sergeant Charles William Thorrock, Sir. V5692108."

"Date of Birth?"

"Ah, August 15th, 1919."

"Age 26 years and ... er ... and let's make it 10 months. Current address?"

"Well, at the moment I'm living with my cousin at 23 Danube Square, South London, Sir. I'm originally from Hartley, Gloucestershire."

"Hmph. Never been there. Alright, next of kin?"

"Er, I suppose my cousin, Sir. Angus Reginald Thorrock, same address."

"Alright. go over there, will you Sergeant, and have these papers stamped."

Thorrock snapped a salute before gathering the sheaf of papers on which the officer had been scribbling. He followed on from that desk to the next. And so it went, until finally he was free to leave.

Outside the heavy bluestone building, Charles's cousin was wandering about aimlessly, smoking.

"Ah there you are! All finished?"

"Yes, I think so. I hope so."

"Good. I know where we can get a half-decent roast dinner with 2 vege and a smashing serve of pudding. Hungry?"

"I suppose so." They began to walk in a westerly direction, along crowded footpaths.

"Look here, Chas. You're not still mouldering over that stupid dream you keep having, are you?"

"Frankly, it's all I ever think about."

"Well, if you want my advice, which I don't suppose you do, I'd lay off that dream. Put it behind you. Driving you crackers, it is."

"I only wish I could, Reggie!" This with a humourless laugh.

"You'd better, you know. End up a fruitcake like that Simpkins boy. Remember how he used to --"

"Reg, I won't go crazy, I promise you. Well, not yet, anyhow."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

They strode along, watching for traffic and dodging bicyclists. For a time, they were silent. But Charles Thorrock's face held an intensity which made it both arresting and disturbing.

"Tell me something, Reggie. Did I shout out anything intelligible this morning?"

"I should rather think you did. Woke me up, you blighter. Thought there was a fire in your room or some such thing."

"But did I say any words that you could understand? Did I call out someone's name?"

"No. Just snatches of random rubbish, actually. Can't remember the half of it."

"Well. I say, old man, would you mind sleeping in the room with me tonight? See if you can hear what I say in my sleep?"

"What? You mean write it down on a piece of paper?"

"Yes, that's it. That would be grand. At least then I'd have something to go on."

"Alright. But it'll cost you a pint."

Charles Thorrock laughed. "Fair enough! See? I'm feeling better already."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"... and then you said 'Derrie has been slaughtered as sacrifice! I would rather tear out my own heart than see this day!' Then something like: 'We must ride with haste to Blennimore!' And then more shouting."

Although his forehead was covered in beads of sweat, Charles was bright-eyed, keen. "Shouting about what?" he asked quickly. "God! I hope that this 'Derrie' is not my mystery girl."

Reggie pondered. He sat forward, leaning his elbows on his knees. "Not sure on that point. You were terribly upset. It was all more or less general yelling. Fright or pain or some such thing."

"Damn", murmured Charles. "Never mind."

There was a long silence. Reggie watched his cousin, uneasy about this recurrent nightmare which caused the deep furrows on Charles's brow. Finally, he spoke.

"Look, Chas. You can't just moulder around here all day, y'know. Of course, you're welcome to stay 's long 's you care to. But I wonder if it wouldn't be a good thing for you to get back into work? Give yourself something else to worry about."

"Yes. I must get a job again. But before that, I think a holiday would do the trick. I want to get away to Wales to try out that new reel I bought. In fact, I'll leave today. Care to join me?"

"Wales? Sounds wizard, but of course, I have to work. Sorry. Envy you the fishing ... How long will you be gone, then?"

"Oh, four or five days, I suppose. Do some fishing, hunting, some hiking: get some fresh air into my lungs. And then, when I get back, I'll start the ruddy job search."

"Rightio. Good show! Probably do you the world of good."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Thorrock spent a couple of hours in the library, as his train did not leave until just prior to luncheon. He was unable to find any mention of a place called 'Blennimore' in the many tomes which were housed there, written on the subject of the British Isles. It was a frustrating quest; even though he tried various different spellings of "Blennimore" to no avail. He reluctantly gave it up, and sloughed off to the railway station.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

As soon as Thorrock escaped London, he began to relax, as the train hurtled along. Charles smoked lazily, looked absently at the passing flashes of countryside, and thought of nothing in particular. He felt quite a new man upon alighting the train at Porthcowl; even optimistic and light-hearted. His cousin had been right. This was just what the erstwhile army sergeant needed.

His little sojourn in Wales proved restful and refreshing. He slept long and dreamlessly throughout the night, and each morning, he went for Olympian walks through some of the most perfect scenery which Great Britain has to offer. Further, Charles ate and drank well at the Prince of Wales Hotel, where the landlady entertained him until taps with her risque wartime stories. Each day, he sat on a canvas folding chair, smoking, while he fished indifferently but peacefully. Time was of no importance to Thorrock during his rustic interlude. Into his head drifted plans for his new post-war

life. He would return to his cabinet-making trade, read improving books and make lots of witty, charming friends. Might even start a half-serious romance or two ...

The landlady, Mrs Tripplen, gave him a smacking kiss of farewell, holding Thorrock overlong to her ample bosom.

"Ah, Sergeant Charlie. Good luck to you, Boyo. May your lucky star shine on you for the rest of your days."

"Thanks, Mildred. I had a smashing time. I'll write to you from London."

The woman shooed him away. "Oh, pshaw! You'll meet some pretty gal in a rose garden and forget all about me."

Charles laughed in genuine amusement. "Well, I hope you're right about her being pretty. But I shan't ever forget you. Goodbye, Sweetheart. Look after yourself."

With that, Thorrock tramped off to the train station. His luggage remained just as it had been when he left London, with the addition of a couple of souvenirs for his relatives. For Reggie, a beer glass with a rude etching on it, and for Reggie's sister, Anne, a book of postcards. He was now a different man to the disturbed ex-soldier who had taken the train from London. To put it succinctly, Thorrock felt that he was now 'sound'. **Sound**. Meaning that he had shaken off the blues which had bedevilled him since his arrival some weeks ago in London.

On the return journey, Thorrock pondered his small family. After the War, his cousin had drifted back into his old job in the newspaper office. Reggie performed a variety of roles at *The Gazette*. He could take photographs, interview eye-witnesses and dash up a nearly readable press article whenever required. His rather vague, devil-may-care attitude to life was somewhat endearing, and had proved a Godsend. The new editor simply loathed stuffed-shirt reporters, and had taken an instant liking to Lieutenant A. R. Thorrock. Charles and Reggie were of an age, roughly the same

height (perhaps Reggie was half-an-inch the taller), and shared many similar interests. Indeed, they were more like brothers than cousins. Anne, younger and quite of a different mold, was a nurse.

Charles found Reggie about to retire for the night. He slapped him affectionately on the shoulder.

"Well, Old Boy. You're looking at a changed man. All sins forgiven. About to embark on a quest for the Holy Grail. Aim to be rich, happy and fat, in that order." Charles chucked his baggage onto the kitchen table as he set about making himself a nightcap.

"Jolly good. No more sleepless nights, then?"

"None!", Charles boasted, proudly. "I told you, I am a new man. And I'm going to start ringing around for work first thing tomorrow morning."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

However, that happy thought did not eventuate. On the following morning, Thorrock, who had been walking about South London at sunrise, swept open the kitchen door at 23 Danube Square. His demeanour was, to put it bluntly, dour.

A young woman was devouring an apple tartlet, and greeted Charles thickly. "Oh, there you are. I've just come off night-shift. Mother wanted me to look in on dear Reggie." She gestured vaguely towards a plate of tartlets. "Have one or five. Cup of tea?"

Thorrock sank into a kitchen chair, accepting both food and drink. He considered the young woman. She was bosomy, healthy, pretty and wore her very long brown hair in a plait which was wound round and round her head.

"I should have said **you** instead of Reggie, you know. Next of kin."

"Beg pardon?"

"When I was demobbed the other day. The chap asked me for my next of kin and I gave your brother's name. But it probably should have been *you*, Anne."

Anne Thorrock nodded sagely. "In fact, it should have been Mother, if the truth be told."

"Probably", Charles murmured. Anne regaled him with all the usual hospital chatter, which thankfully took his mind off all his worries. They sipped tea and laughed at Anne's absurd anecdotes. But when his cousin stopped to draw breath, the old haunted look returned quickly to Thorrock's face.

"What on earth is wrong with you, Chas? You look all in."

"Oh, I'm having these ruddy dreams. Actually, *one* particular dream. The same one over and over again. It keeps dragging me towards insanity."

It was then that Reggie stumbled into the kitchen, sketchily dressed in striped pyjamas.

"Ah, Anne! You here? Thought I heard your voice". The siblings shared a chaste kiss on the cheek.

"Hello, Reg. Tea?"

"Please." Reg then turned to Charles. "What's the matter with you? Not those bally dreams again, Cuz?"

Charles nodded, indolently.

"But I thought they stopped when you went to Wales, damn it!", sputtered Reggie.

Charles sighed. "Yes, they did. But apparently I'm not a new man after all."

Anne turned towards her cousin. "What's this? Oh, do tell me about this ... this ... nightmare, is that right? Frightfully interesting."

Charles sighed again, fiddling restlessly with the teaspoon.

"Interesting, is it? I'm not sure **what** to make of it. I wake up in the most appalling state, yet I can hardly remember what caused the distress. Something in the dream is **driving** me, driving me onwards. It's the **urgency** more than anything that I feel upon waking ... and yet ... and yet, I have no idea what is so damned pressing." Charles shifted in his seat. "And now the dream is creeping into real life."

"How?" the brother and sister asked in unison.

"I woke up ... God, I don't know. Before dawn. I was pretty browned-off, I can tell you, because this bloody dream didn't surface at all, in any way, whilst I was in the West. Then, lo and behold, back to Reggie's house and straight away ... At least this time, I remembered snatches of it. Just bits and pieces. Riding a spirited horse through a vale of oaks. Stretching my hand out to grasp somebody's hand ..."

"Go on", prompted Anne, excitedly.

"I got up and dressed. As I said, I was feeling thoroughly lousy with the world. So I walked to the park and wandered by the river. Then, just as I turned back, ready to cross George Street, I pulled up short. A girl with long brownish hair, astride a wild-looking shaggy grey pony, blocked my path. She reached out to me, calling: "Quick, Rainard!" I was ... I was appalled. She was really, really there, in front of me! My heart stopped; I didn't breathe. Then instantly, she was gone. But I ... I just couldn't move."

Charles shrugged his shoulders.

Reg was transfixed, shaking his head in disbelief. "Incredible, incredible," he muttered.

Anne was more objective. "Mmmm. Wonder who Rainard is? Could this be post-war trauma? You know, the sort of surreal almost madness from which warriors suffer?"

"Shell-shock, do you mean?"

"Yes, I s'pose so. For instance, I gather that you've only been having this nightmare since you returned from the War. Is that so?"

"Since I came here, to Danube Square."

"So, every night since you came *here*?"

Charles was relieved to be able to negate that. He reminded his cousin that he had slept soundly whilst on his Welsh holiday.

"So only *here*?", Anne persisted, pointing to the floor. "In that room? Perhaps the room is spooked?"

Reggie immediately pooh-poohed that idea. "Nonsense, Sis! Can't be, for I slept there with him one night." Reg then turned quite pink, aghast at what his words must have sounded like. "Of course, nothing untoward, don't y'know. Just so that I could catch what he said in his sleep!"

"What did he say, then?"

"Oh, he rambled on about foggy rivers and damsels in distress. But that's not the point, Anne. The *point* is that it can't be that room because I didn't dream at all when I was asleep in it."

Anne was not to be beaten. "Well, the bed then."

Charles and Reg stopped fiddling with the kitchen accoutrements and stared at the young woman with arrested expressions on their faces.

"The bed ... ", Charles breathed. He looked towards the other man. "Tell me about it. Who else has ever slept in it? Have you?"

"No. I bought it second-hand when you rang to say that you were planning to doss here."

Charles drummed his fingers on the table. "You've never used that bed, then?"

Reggie shook his head.

Charles then turned to Anne. "You?"

"I don't stay here all that much, Cuz. I've perfectly respectable digs of my own at the dorm."

"Well, then. We'd better investigate this. Come on."

The three kinsfolk trooped towards Reggie's spare room. They stood in the doorway, studying the single bed. It was a solid, walnut piece; a tribute to square-shouldered, middle-class austerity. Nothing about that bed could inspire one to endure such fantastic imaginings as those under which Charles now laboured.

Reggie summed it up: "It's just a plain bed. Nothing fancy about it at all!"

Anne spoke firmly. "I have a wonderful notion. If the **bed** is the cause of the dreams, then Reggie must sleep in it tonight. To prove the theory!", she concluded, triumphantly.

Her brother immediately expostulated.

"No, Reggie. Listen to me. **You** must sleep here, whilst Charles will sleep in that chair over there. And I shall bed down in your room, as an independent witness."

Anne turned on her heel, with Reggie trailing after her, arguing frantically. Charles chuckled. There was something in Anne's suggestion, although it was totally ridiculous to suppose that an inanimate piece of furniture could cause a female to materialize (on horseback!) in George Street, along with all the other phantasms. Just too stupid, really.

The upshot was that at approximately three o'clock next morning, Charles Thorrock woke suddenly, in some alarm, as the most blood-curdling scream reverberated through the small bedroom. As Charles hauled himself from sleep, Anne threw open the door, allowing light to stream into the room. Her brother was shaking like a blancmange: ashen-faced, eyes popping. He was found to be sitting up in the spare bed, clutching violently at the sheets.

"Rainard! Rainard!" Reggie shouted in terror. "Beware of Glenowan's sword!"

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"Blimey!"

Charles and his cousins lounged about in Reg's modestly-furnished sitting-room. It was not yet half-past three in the morning. Anne had thoughtfully provided her menfolk and herself with cups of tea. They drank in virtual silence, only punctuated by Reg's exclamations.

"Blimey!" Reg shook his head, as if to clear it. "That's more than a bally dream, Chas. It's a ... it's a biblical vision, that's what it is."

"Then tell me what happened to **you** at Blennimore."

"My name's Hoggard. I'm nothing more than a swain; got a herd of pigs to mind. Take them under the oak trees every day to feed on the acorns. I simply sit there, playing a wooden recorder. You know, one of those frontward flute things. Whilst children romp about on the green. It's so lovely ... so perfect. Everyone seems to be utterly happy there.

"But then, something vile stirred the men into battle. You went riding past me, Charles, except that your name is Rainard. You're quite a gung-ho sort of a chap. Some sort of relation of mine. Anyhow, I'm not much use when a fierce fight breaks out ... can't think why I'm incapacitated. I can't get there to help you ... can only call out desperately. And and then ..."

"And then you woke up?", asked Charles, gently.

"Yes". There was a universe of disappointment in his cousin's voice.

Reggie spoke again. "But that's not what frightens me. It's a fabulous yarn, really it is. But the awful truth is that it's all so very *real*! It's as if I really were Hoggard and I could remember doing things as him. Not like a dream at all."

Charles nodded. "Yes. I thought so, too. So tell me ... was there a girl with long, brown hair? A very lovely girl?"

"Do you mean the one you saw in the street? No such luck, I'm afraid."

"Then who is Glenowan?"

"Who?" Reggie was utterly lost.

"You shouted out Glenowan's name. Something about his sword. I was to be careful of Glenowan's sword."

Reggie looked blankly at his cousin. "No idea, I'm afraid. Sorry Old Chap."

Anne interceded. "We must all try to get back to sleep, you know. Thank goodness I've a day off tomorrow. That is, **today**. And no one is to sleep in that ruddy bed. Excuse my French, but I jolly well believe we'd all be better off to flog that bed, first thing!"

"Hear! Hear!" Reggie agreed. All Charles could think about was returning to slumber. That, and his relief at knowing that he wasn't absolutely going off his crewet. He voted to take the couch and dived onto it without ceremony. Reggie began to doze in the armchair on which he was already seated.

Minutes later, when the two men snored rhythmically, Anne floated noiselessly through her brother's house. She returned to the spare room, to undertake a minute inspection of the walnut bed. There was nothing – **nothing!** – to show any kind of sinister influence. The bed was a plain, unfurnished, ordinary walnut bed.

Anne tried sitting on it. She could see from the window that dawn was already breaking. This was summer after all. As her eyes became heavy, she felt strands of weak daylight falling on her through the portal. A rooster crowed just as one of the serving wenches, Ellen, began to bustle about in preparation for the morning.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

END OF CHAPTER I

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER II

“Mind your step!” The old man’s voice assailed Fynne’s ears from outside the single women’s shorthouse.

“Mind your step ... that’s right!” Waisser was encouraging Fynne’s nephew to climb the rough-hewn wooden stairs which led to No Man’s Land.

“Go away, you blighter!”, Fynne called to him. “You’re not allowed up here.”

The old man cackled. “Aw, there’s nothing to see. And look! Here is your little nephew come a-calling.”

Fynne was obliged to allow the toddler into her bed. He tried to suckle at her naked breast, to no avail. Laughing, the girl chastised both Waisser and the infant, and sent the noisy slave about her business by chucking a boot at her.

“Come on, everyone out! It’s time I got up. Ellen, you must fetch me some water. And you, old man, take yourself and this child back where you belong. You know very well that there’s no men allowed in here.”

Waisser was fascinated by the girl's beauty. She was utterly naked as she stood in the pale morning light, stretching and scratching. "Aw, they don't mind for an old cootie like me."

"Well I mind! Get out!" Loudly, she called: "Ellen! Where's my ruddy water? I have to wash myself."

For a few months, Fynne had been the sole occupant of the unmarried women's quarters. Everyone else, except for the young men, lived in the communal longhouse of the Dale Folk. Before the year was out, a couple of girls who were now pre-pubescent, and who lived with their families in the longhouse, would move into the women's quarters. By then, Fynne would be long gone.

Fynne was fated to leave the Dale Folk. When a single woman was claimed by some stranger, she would be taken to join his tribe, and live with him in *his* longhouse. It was extremely rare for girls to wed young men from their own tribe. On the other hand, the stranger who took the maiden from her family would most likely belong to the same confederation, so that not all contact between the girl and her kin would be lost. And such, as it happens, was to be Fynne's future.

The longhouse was close enough for the young maidens to hear the laughter and singing at night, to hear the babies bawling, the dogs fighting, and sometimes even arguments between the men. As soon as the boys began to show too much interest in the women, they were hustled off to their own shorthouse (known affectionately as "The Cock Barn"), which was situated some paces off. These single young men were more trouble than they were worth, and were encouraged to ride off and seek a bride outside the community at the earliest opportunity. And some did. Others contented themselves with the slaves, which was permitted, as long as they did not cause any trouble. Waisser was in a nebulous position, being widowed many years ago. His brother was the wise chief, Wulfes, and several of his male relatives were of high standing. In the nature of things, every man in the tribe had beside him all his living male kinsmen. He lived for the rest of his life without his sisters and grown-up daughters.

Waisser hobbled close enough to reach out and fondle the young woman's white breasts. She slapped his hand and threatened to scream if he touched her again. "This body is saved for another man. He will have exclusive use of it. And he won't appreciate damaged goods."

"Well, he's very lucky, young Elwyd. I can't recall when I've seen such a wonderful form on a girl. You're as close to perfect as ever could be."

Fynne made not the slightest effort to cover her shame. She brushed her long hair, whilst the old man salivated and tugged at this groin. It was the timely arrival of her aunt (sister of the dead Henreft) which saved Fynne. Waisser narrowly dodged the blow aimed at his ear by ducking fortuitously. The kick aimed at his rear end found its mark, however, and the old man scurried out of the shorthouse in what order he could muster.

When Fynne had finished washing herself with a wet clout, the older woman handed her niece a new shift (of her own creation), a shawl and a highly decorated leather belt. "Getting ready? This is your big day. Do you know what to do? What's expected of you tonight?"

"Yes, Osherg. Everyone's been doling out advice left, right and centre." Osherg smiled in a motherly way, patting her niece's arm. Fynne was already festooned with garlands of fragrant blossoms, placed in her hair and on her clothing (amid great excitement, giggling and whispering) by girls and young women from the three tribes.

At the appointed hour, when the sun had passed over the lowest branch of the old apple tree, the Dale Folk wandered off, some riding, but most walking. It was a lovely day. They took their time. Women and girls stooped or stretched to gather blossoms and fragrant branchlets. Singing gaily, the females would forever prove that nothing lifted the spirits so much as did a wedding. Fynne, being such a beautiful girl, was always the centre of attention.

The ultimate destination was a spot just near the Hill Folk longhouse. This was a well-known shorthouse (a special shorthouse) called The Bower. It was an all-purpose, mean construction,

intended for holding weddings and death-watches. The Bower's favourite use was as a "first night" retreat for the newly-weds. After the wedding rite had been solemnly performed, and while the assembled crowd ate and drank, a few of the lads would erect the nuptial cot in the Bower. Their wives, sisters and female friends then scurried about strewing aromatic herbs, flowers and leaves about the Bower, to appease the goddess Erce.

Elwyd walked proudly at the head of a long procession of Hill Folk (who obviously did not have far to come) and other men and boys of all tribes. Beside the groom strode his father Hildoffa. Then followed the dowry, which was comprised of Dale livestock being led along by slaves, and a flower-covered wagon. Some decorations were put on the cows and pigs; many of the folk carried long sticks about which floral displays were tied.

From the other direction came a very small party. Osherg and Wulfes supported the bride. Before this trio skipped a bevy of little girls, waving greenery on high. Behind the bridal party (and at some distance) strolled Fynne's brothers. Hoggard and Rainard were too busy with their Cock Barn smut to pay much attention to their sister. As the bride and her sides reached the Bower, all the girls, old and young, formed an archway, composed of the vegetation gathered along the way. It was all merriment for the girls, however seriously the menfolk behaved.

With great ceremony, Osherg handed her niece to Henrith, who was to become Fynne's mother-in-law. This great lady, the wife of the Hill chief, solemnly led the girl to the Bower. The older woman whispered: "Tonight, scream out as if you are in pain when it goes in. Everyone will be listening, and you want to make it sound interesting. And be submissive. They like that." Fynne visibly blanched with this stark realization of what lay before her.

The brightly-coloured and decorated curtain which hung over the entrance to the Bower had been drawn back by slaves. Fynne could see men standing about inside the hut, waiting for her. This was indeed her big day. Her entrance was met by approving grunts from these men. She gripped Henrith's hand and heard a faint "Sh! Sh!" of comfort. One young man of good height was extremely happy to see Fynne in her bridal beauty. His face was suffused with rapture. He had known Fynne for

years. They had played together in past times, whenever the Federation had come together like this. And now, they were to be married.

At this time, the Bower contained a bench and some stools. Eorl, the Mere Folk chieftain, looked very stern. Through his long, grey beard, he asked: "Elwyd, are you willing in your own mind to take this woman, Fynne, to wife? Say to all who can hear you that you have come into this Bower willingly, and without duress."

The tall young man nodded, as he stepped forward. "I have come freely to this wedding."

The old eyes turned to the bride. "Let no man constrain any girl to part with her maidenhead unless she be fully and wholly in agreement to be wed. Does Fynne come willingly and without force of any kind, from any man or woman to Elwyd's love?"

Wulfes spoke. "She does."

Hildoffa, chief of the Hill Folk, stepped forward, to address Wulfes. "What does the daughter of good-Gress-that-was bring to the marriage?"

Wulfes enumerated the 2 milking cows, 2 pigs, 6 bushels of grain and the 8 fleeces that comprised Fynne's dowry. Hildoffa already knew this, but it was necessary to publicly enumerate the bride-goods.

"A goodly stash", nodded Hildoffa. "Let these two join hands in wedlock."

Then, in great solemnity, the three chieftains guided Fynne towards her bridegroom. There was a moment of panic as the girl drew back. The three older men, practised and patient, easily dealt with these bridal nerves. Elwyd, however, had to master his trembles on his own, for his side (his half-brother Cempa) was off somewhere on the black stallion, and had not been seen since the previous

night. Soon, Elwyd had captured the two little hands between his, whilst around this link, the chieftains entwined their own hands and arms in a symbolic rope.

Hildoffa spoke loudly, so that the crowd outside could hear him. "By the covenant of the god Seaxneat, these two shall be known as man and wife so long as they both live."

Eorl followed with: "Let no man nor woman come betwixt or between this pair in their wedlock, until the cold earth swallow up the one or the other."

Then it was Wulfes's turn. "By the covenant of the immortal ancestor Kyran, Elwyd and Fynne should be known by all to be married, and they will bring forth many boys and girls."

The chieftains stepped back. Eorl sat heavily on a stool, as his severe arthritis was almost crippling him.

"The man shall protect his wife, and give her shelter and food," continued Hildoffa, pointing to his son. "He will not raise his hand against her, without just cause. He will remain true to her with his goods and with his body until her dead body is buried in the ground."

Wulfes nodded, then replied. "The woman shall serve her carl and know him as her only carl. She will love him with her body, to be true only to his law until his life end."

Now, after all this, Hildoffa smiled. "Let this love be sealed with a kiss."

Elwyd, beaming, bent down to the scared little face. He closed his eyes, feeling the delicious warmth of the eager mouth on his. There was faint, intoxicating scent from the flowers in Fynne's hair. He came back to earth as the clapping and shouting began. Hildoffa and Henrith were tremendously proud of their boy. Osherg wept, while Eorl looked about for a slave to fetch him a drinking horn brimming with ale.

The names of Elwyd and Fynne were ringing out, both from inside and outside the Bower. The young man beamed in pure, unabashed delight. For the girl, only the strong grip on her hands made any sense at this moment.

Hildoffa turned to address Wulfes. "My wife has some jewels for our new daughter."

With this gentle reminder, Wulfes asked ponderously: "What gifts does Elwyd bring to this marriage?"

Henrith (who had slipped out of the Bower for a brief moment) passed back through the doorway, bearing a bundle. On the bench, she unrolled the cloth to reveal a superb gold necklace, bracelet and ring. The craftsmanship was unparalleled: gold threads had been twined into shapes, and linked together to form a storyboard of the journey many decades ago from the old home in Denmark to Britain's shores. Tiny Jutes steered curraugh-like leather craft down the coast of Holland, and from thence to brave the Channel. Carefully, Elwyd decked his lovely bride in these pieces. When it came to placing the ring on Fynne's finger, Elwyd decided that it was his turn to speak.

"Fynne, all my love is for you, and you alone. This ring bears witness to my eternal love. By the god Seaxneat, the ancestor Kyran, by the goddess Erce, I will honour this vow, and cherish you."

This declaration brought great joy to all and sundry. Wulfes was seen to wipe away a couple of tears. Elwyd wound an arm about his bride's shoulder, ready to receive a throng of well-wishers. The loving couple glowed side-by-side.

"So, athelings, let the merriment of this day bring young and old into the meadow to sport and dance and play!" Eorl was nearly hoarse; he had been given the longed-for ale, and was now content.

Without further invitation, the men and boys played games and sports with wooden balls, stout sticks and large rings made of twisted willow. They strained at the tug-of-war, then showed-off by

carrying heavy logs and rocks over a pre-determined course. It was all wrestling, rolling and rollicking under that warm Summer sun. The Hill ladies brought forward food which slaves had prepared on spit and bench. The feasting, dancing, and merriment pleased all; bride and groom wandered about together, receiving small gifts, watching the festivities.

"Where be your brother, Elwyd?" asked a Hill man. "I made sure he'd be standing by you this day, as your side."

The bridegroom had become separated from his bride, owing to the need for the girls to fuss over the lovely maiden. "I know not where Cempa is. My father is angry at the stallion being taken, that I **do** know."

"When did you last see him, then? Your part-brother, I mean."

"Last night."

"And he raced off, did he, robbing Hildoffa of his black beast? And you not knowing where he went? Or why? Ah ... I mislike this, Elwyd. He's sure to be lying in a ditch somewhere screaming for help."

Elwyd shook his head. "Nay, Rytlo. For mark how undisturbed his bitch is. If he had hurt himself, Brach would be off her head, don't you think?" The slinky greyhound was thoroughly enjoying herself with a group of playful children.

Rytlo poked Elwyd in the chest. "And that's another question. Why has he rushed off without Brach, his beloved dog? That's a head-scratcher for you!"

That thought had occurred to Elwyd, too. It was impossible to imagine Cempa without a dog. Yes, and it was hard to fathom Cempa stealing Hildoffa's valuable steed. Cempa was Hildoffa's nephew, the son of an earlier legitimate union between Hildoffa's now dead brother and Henrith. Cempa and Hildoffa had always been very close. What could have happened there?

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The long summer day was drawing to its close.

A small crowd had gathered outside the Bower, which had speedily been converted into a tiny bedroom, as was the time-honoured custom. Elwyd proudly held his bride's hand, leading her around the Bower three times. The men clapped, wishing Elwyd a good night's work. Elwyd responded by winking, nodding, and grinning. The women laughed and sang as they handed Fynne switches of scented leaves. The bride was simply radiant, bestowing heavenly smiles on all whose eye she caught. Then, as the third circuit concluded, Henrith held open the flap of fabric which served as a doorway to the Bower. Her son shepherded his sweet wife through the opening, bestowing a quick kiss on his mother's brow as he did so. Her whispered advice was that he should be gentle with the untried girl. Grinning, Elwyd carefully closed the flap behind him.

The bridegroom turned. Fynne stood shy, undecided next to the low wedding cot. She looked about as would a trapped young mare. Elwyd licked his lips, trying to think of his next words.

"I'll undress you," was all Elwyd could come up with, speaking in a low voice.

As he approached her, the frightened virgin rushed into speech: "Your mumma told me to scream. So ... if I yell out, don't be alarmed. I shall not mean it ..."

Elwyd nodded. By now, his nervous fingers were working on decorative pins, folds of loosely-woven fabric, and ribbon ties. The vernal aroma of her was more than he could stand. With a few more tugs, the wedding finery slipped easily to the ground, such that Elwyd was able to drink-in the soft wonder that was his naked wife. He purred deeply as his trembling hands stroked the white skin, eliciting a gasp of alarm from the bride.

The man's mouth covered hers, stalling her attempts to undress him. Elwyd did not need any assistance there, however, for he swiftly ripped off his own garments. With his cock standing hard in

his loins, the young man pushed his lover down onto the tiny cot, fumbling as he tried to force his cock into her heavenly portal.

Gasping in terror, the virgin was told harshly to relax. "Be easy! Don't make yourself so tight!" With a whispered prayer to the goddess Erce, Fynne shrieked loudly. The love-locked pair did not giggle upon hearing the appreciation of the crowd outside; they were purely engrossed in each other now.

After some more happy moments, the wedding audience dispersed. Another lucky marriage had been celebrated, and they were sure, now consummated. Another baby would come ... another wonder of life ...

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Elwyd, nestled at his sleeping wife's breast as any suckling, hauled himself out of the nuptial cot. He needed to piss. The very first shards of dawn appeared in the East as the newly-married man relieved himself in the bushes. A noise behind him caused Elwyd to turn swiftly.

Rainard laughed: "It's alright: it's only me. I'll join you. Never much fun to piss alone, is it?"

"Yes, join me. Do you know that your sister is --"

"Sh, sh, my good friend. I don't want to hear what you've been getting up to . That's one fuck that I **won't** want to hear all the gory details about!"

When they had finished pissing, Rainard put his arm around Elwyd's shoulder, to lead him back to the Bower. Rainard chucked his new brother on the shoulder, then on the chin. Laughing for no apparent reason, they swaggered across the uneven ground, when Wulfes emerged from the gloom, standing before the young men, holding up his hand.

"I'm more than sorry, but you two boys must join us by the river. Something horrible has happened and we need --"

Elwyd leapt forward, grasping the chief by his shoulders. "Who is dead?"

Wulfes, solemn, shook his head. He turned, and began to stride back to the riverside. He only stopped to check that the lads were following him. They were not, so he flicked his head imperatively, gesturing to the young men that they were obligated to join the group of men who stood about in the early morn.

In the first light of morning, Elwyd was permitted a few minutes to say farewell to his beloved bride. She woke, still stark naked, stretching out on the wedding bed in a way which sent the bridegroom's pulses racing.

Sadly, Elwyd whispered: "I am sorry to have to leave you so soon, little Fynne." He caressed her pale skin lovingly.

Fynne sat up. "What? Where do you go?"

Elwyd lowered himself onto the bed, holding her hand in his. "Cempa has made his play under cover of our wedding day."

"He has stolen your father's black stallion, they say."

Elwyd kissed Fynne's fingers. "Worse. Cempa has been bewitched, and has sped off with the wish to kidnap the lovely Queen Netta-Vere."

"Impossible!" breathed Fynne.

"It's true. A party of us must chase him, and haul him back."

Elwyd looked at the concerned face before him. He yearned to be with his wife all the day -- for every day, for all the seasons. He lay on her warm body, kissing her lips and breasts. A man outside the Bower urgently called his name. Unwilling, utterly sad, Elwyd stood, trying to hide the shame of his erect dick.

"Fynne, you must go to the Hill shorthouse, as you may not sleep in the Hill Folk longhouse without your husband. May as well wait for me in my Mother's loving care." In case of argument, and setting the partner-bond off to a good start, Elwyd raised a finger. "That is my ruling, Fynne. I am your carl, and you must honour my word."

"But it is dreadfully hard to tear apart from you."

There were tears. Elwyd did not see them. He left the bride as quickly as he could; else, he could not leave at all.

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END OF CHAPTER II

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER III

Reg Thorrock drove to Wethersyde, pulling up in front of H. J. Williams & Bros Auctions and Second Hand Sales. He sauntered into the dingy warehouse, trailing smoke from his Craven A.

“Excuse me, my man. I bought an item here about –”, Reg asked an evil-looking little person.

“We don’t give no refunds ‘ere, Matey, so clear off!”

Shocked at fellow’s rudeness, Reg exploded: “Now just a minute! I need to ask you –”

“I don’t care *what’s* wrong wiff it. We never gave ya no guarantee. It’s ‘buyer beware’, Old Cock.”

Reg lunged forward, grabbing the chap by the shoulder and spinning him round. “See here! I only want to find out about the previous owner, that’s all.”

The man didn’t like being manhandled, and lost much of his bravado. “What for? What d’ya want to know for?”

An idea came to Reg. He bent down closer to the man and looked about him, furtively. Reg spoke softly: "That's a police matter, my friend. All very hush-hush." Here, Reg winked and tapped the side of his nose.

"What's goin' on? You're no copper ... I can smell 'em a mile orf!"

Calm as you like, Reg continued. "It's a military matter. Can't take you any further than that, but from the information we found out at Intelligence about this bloke ... It's all very sinister, and I need to talk to the man in rather a hurry."

Wide-eyed and gaping, the warehouse packer gulped and then with a curt "Foller me" led Reg to a pokey office, hidden away behind mountains of lumber. There he found a weary clerk.

"Give 'im whatever information 'e needs, will ya, Bill?" Turning to look up at Thorrock, the little man nodded. "Bill'll take care of it all, Old Cock."

Bill, the clerk, sighed sadly, before asking Reg for the details of his purchase. Riffing through papers, searching in grotty files and rummaging in drawers eventually brought its reward.

"Here you are, Mr Thorrock. That particular bed was purchased from a Roger Rowntree of 18 Shrove Avenue, Glossop. No telephone number, I'm afraid."

"Thanks. Do you know what profession Rowntree is involved in? What I mean ... if he's a retired gent, then I can catch him at his home."

"I'm sure I can't tell you, Sir. If he's out, say at work, you could always slip a note under his door ..."

Here, Bill shrugged his shoulders.

“Anyway, thanks very much, my man. You’ve been very helpful indeed.” At this point, Reg peeled a fiver from his wallet and passed it across the table. It was grasped and pocketed with some speed. Judging by the quick glance towards the filthy windows, the long-suffering clerk was being watched.

It was a fine day for driving to Glossop. Thorrock made good time. Not that it mattered; he’d earned himself a couple of days off due to a rather marvellous undercover story relating to illegal dealings in a local hotel. His editor saw him as the golden-haired boy, and the young newshound fully intended to trade on that to the hilt.

The Rowntree establishment was a solid brick house from the preceding century, heavily set in an imposing garden. Rowntree evidently had money. Reg strode purposefully up the winding path, which was charmingly edged with violets, pansies and sweet alics. His sharp knock was eventually answered. As the door swung open, Thorrock heard a radio playing classical music in some other part of the house.

“Yes?” asked the occupant, a middle-aged gent wearing a faded, shapeless cardigan. He was still in his slippers.

“Good morning, Mr Rowntree. I’m Reg Thorrock, formerly a Lieutenant in His Majesty’s Armed Forces, don’t ye know. I managed to obtain your name and address from Williams Auctions in Wethersyde. I’ve just come from there, as a matter of fact. I say, I know this’ll sound rather odd but —“

“The bed. It’s about that bed, isn’t it? You bought that bed from Williams, didn’t you?” The man visibly paled, standing at his threshold. Nervously, he ran a hand over his face.

Reg was somewhat startled by this reaction. He’d half expected the door to be slammed in his face. “Er, yes. Now see here! I’ve just a few questions. Won’t keep you very long. May I come in, do you think?”

"Of course. Please forgive me but ... I wanted to burn that blasted bed, you know. However, I had paid a king's ransom for it at an antique dealer's shop. I felt such a fool ... Please, do come in."

Thorrock entered Rowntree's house. There was a sad, lonely feeling in the politely docile layout of the sitting room, into which Rowntree led him.

"A sensible bed, that's what you'd call it", Rowntree began as the two men sat down. "Not fussy. I hate fussy things. All that Victorian scrollwork you still see about: such nonsense. Can't abide it. That's why I liked the look of this one: four-square and no frills.

"I thought it might make a decent spare bed, you know. My nephew often comes over to stay with me. Poor boy ... I don't think he'll ever get over it." Here, Rowntree drove his fist into his palm.

"I should never have sold it on. I suppose that I wanted to get back some of the money I'd spent on it. Wretched decision! I could have burnt it in my backyard, you know. I should have done so, instead of subjecting other souls to such misery."

"Misery?" asked Reg, who was very surprised by Rowntree's last remark. "What do you mean by 'misery'?"

Rowntree dropped his head into his hands. He raked his fingers through his badly-cut grey hair.

"When my poor young nephew came to visit me ... he came up from London on the bus, with his duffle bag ... and I happily gave him the spare bedroom. I'd only just gone to bed myself when I heard the lad screaming in absolute terror. Of course, I ran downstairs, imaging all sorts of foul play, to find him trying to scratch his way out of the window. I've never seen such horror ... his eyes were bulging horribly. His screams were so piercing. Oh, God! Nothing I said calmed him ... he sobbed and howled by turns. Mr Thorrock ... I can't begin to describe my nephew's fear."

Now, Reg could have entertained his host by recounting some of his wartime experiences, which would certainly have exceeded anything the beloved nephew could come up with. However, Reg

was determined to learn more about the bed. Rather than waylay Rowntree's story, even though Reg was very cool to any suggestion that he knew nothing of pure gut-wrenching terror, Thorrock let these reflections slide through to the 'keeper. Rather, Reg prompted Rowntree to continue with the tale.

"Go on, will you? Tell me about your nephew. How old was he at the time you've described?"

"Oh, he's about 14 or 15. This all happened many months ago." The man sighed, shaking his head.

"Well? And so what happened next?" Reg prodded.

Rowntree pondered, staring into space. "I had no idea what had caused the boy's fright. No idea at all. I gave him some warm milk and tried to say soothing words. It was then that he told me that violent spectres had attacked him. Huge, roaring dragons spat fire at him. Then ghoulish monsters tried to eat his flesh. Totally shocking ... a vile nightmare! I gave him a sleeping tablet and tried to get him back to bed. But he refused to re-enter that room. Nothing could force him back there. And so, Mr Thorrock, my nephew slept happily that night on the couch with no more bad dreams."

"And then you decided to sell the bed?"

"God, no! I had no *idea* that the cause of the distress was that ruddy bed until much later, long after my nephew had visited me. It was quite accidental, really. My bedroom was being painted, and I couldn't bear the smell of the paint. Quite unthinking, I dosed down in the spare room. I had just closed my eyes, and there they were. Writhing monsters rose out of the mattress, tearing at my face with razor-sharp nails. As one of these ghastly creatures attacked me, five or six more rose up to plunge into my body. I woke (thank God!) only seconds later, and tore out into the garden. Needless to say, I spent the next fortnight at an hotel, barely able to return to my home. And the very first thing I did was to call up some removalists to take away that damn thing."

Here, Rowntree was too overcome to speak. Reg tried to say something a propos to the situation; but Reg became awkward, unaccustomedly tongue-tied.

Then, Reg's host frowned. His tone changed. "But I hardly need to tell you this. I suppose you've suffered these unspeakable nightmares yourself, Lieutenant Thorrock."

"Well, no. Actually, not --"

"But ... then I don't understand!" Rowntree sat up, in consternation. "I made sure that you'd come to see me to find out more about that bed."

"Of course I did. But -- "

Rowntree was very concerned. "As soon as you mentioned Williams Auctions, I understood that you'd come here to have it out with me about the horrible visions and what have you emanating from that blasted bed."

Reg had to put Rowntree on the right track, and quickly. "Look here. My cousin woke me up, shouting out in his sleep. Sounds like your young nephew, if the truth be told, except that there were no ghosts. Nothing like that at all. Oh yes, he was kipping in that *diabolical* cot alright. However, unlike your nevvie, he had the *same* dream, over and over again, every time he lay down on that infernal contraption. A battle, charging through woods on a fiery steed, brandishing a sword. And the obligatory beautiful maiden on horseback. Nearly set him over the edge. Though, mind you, there wasn't a ghost to be seen. So then *I* had a bash at the bed. Same thing. It's some old-time story ... very Gothic. Therefore, --"

Rowntree was appalled. "But ... but that can't be! That's not right. *Everyone* who's ever slept in the bed has experienced the most *unspeakable* nightmares, just as I described. Ghosts, ghouls, fantastic creatures, spectral murderers: the whole lot. One chap committed suicide last century because of that bed."

"How the hell do you know that?"

"Because I (like you) chased up the previous owners via that antique dealer I told you about. I telephoned him, and he hung up on me without a word. I went to see him: wouldn't open the door. In desperation, I wrote to him, *begging* him to tell me all that he knew. He replied to my letter with several pages of the most incredible detail of the bed's history. It must have taken him months of foot-slogging and letter-writing to uncover these facts. Quite a remarkable piece of detective work, one would imagine. You may read the letter, if you like."

"Yes, please. I'd like it very much indeed. In fact, I'd intended to do a spot of sleuthing myself, being employed as a newshound."

Roger Rowntree had risen from his armchair to search through his escritoire for the letter. "Well, I can save you the trouble, Sir. Here you are. Tell me what you think; it's quite an extraordinary letter. Please, take your time, while I get you a cup of tea."

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"... so I sat in his pathetic little sitting room, reading that dashed letter. Pages and pages of the most appalling stuff. On and on."

Reg looked in a deliberate fashion at Charles, and then at Anne. The three kinsfolk sat around his kitchen table, dressed for bed and sipping cocoa.

"For centuries, it seems that ruddy bed has caused the most unbelievable nightmares for whomever slept in it. Writhing furies, unspeakably violent beasts, zombies, vampires. Edgar Allan Poe could never have imagined even one half of these shocking spectres. And they all emanated from *my* spare bed!"

Reg brought his hand down heavily on the table, making Anne jump.

Charles spoke. "But Reg, did **you** see any ghosts? I mean, **you** didn't see anything supernatural in your dream, did you? If you did, you didn't mention it at the time."

Reg started like a rabbit. "Ghosts? In my ...? No ... no, I should rather think not."

Charles leaned forward, spreading his hands. "And **I** didn't. So ..."

"I beg your pardon? Am I missing something?"

"You see, the question is, Cuz: why were we spared? What's different about **us**?"

Reg couldn't think. He shook his head, rising suddenly from his chair. "Too hard, Charles. Too hard. Leave me to sleep on that one. You're absolutely right, though. It doesn't make any sense that everybody else suffered **one** kind of shocker, but the two of us just had a jolly old costume drama thingummy. No sense at all. Anyway, I'm off to bed. This has all been rather exhausting. Chasing about Glossop, and so on. Toodle-oo until the morrow."

"Oh, Reg, don't leave yet. Wait and hear what I have to say", pleaded Anne, urgently. She had been waiting for an opportunity to add her tuppence-worth to the conversation. It seemed she was to be denied the chance.

"Yes? Go on, then." Reg drove his hands into the pockets of his dressing-gown. Anne hesitated, causing her brother to prod her with: "Well?"

Before she began, Anne licked her lips. "That other morning, when you both went back to sleep, I decided to ... to sit on that bed." Anne stopped, biting her bottom lip.

"And?" Charles prompted, keenly.

"I know that we all agreed to scrap that bed. And at the time, it seemed the most sensible course of action. But ... I ... I sat on it and went straight into the dream."

Charles sat bolt upright, while Reg took a quick step forward. Much alarmed, they both exclaimed at their female relative's antics.

Anne hurried into speech. "Honestly, I simply sat on the bed to think about things, and I was *there*."

"At Blennimore?"

"N-no, that's not its name. It's some place in the New Forest, near the Avon. You two are my brothers, and you've taken off on a ripping adventure. I've wed the most wonderful man on earth. He's gone with you."

"Gone where, Anne?"

"After someone called Cempa. You're tracking him with dogs. I'm so in love with my Elwyd. I woke up in tears after he left. Actually, I didn't wake up until very late that afternoon."

"I didn't notice," remarked Reg. "I tear off to work each morning, without giving you another thought."

Charles, meanwhile, was staring at his cousin, as if seeing her for the first time. "Elwyd ... I feel that I've heard that name before. It means something ... if only I could remember ... And were you there? I mean, really there, in body? Like ... like we were?"

Anne nodded. "Yes. I had a real wedding night."

Her matter-of-factness caused Charles to sit back in shocked amazement. He laughed in embarrassment at her candour.

Reg exploded. "My God! That's enough!" The young man paced around his kitchen, raking his fingers wildly through his thick hair. "That's just not acceptable fodder for a family conversation, dear girl!"

Charles, over his initial shock, felt much sympathy for his cousin, and patted her arm. "Anne, was this just snips and snatches, randomly presented, or did the story seem continuous, as if marching along?"

"Continuous. It lasted for almost two days. I went to the federation of the tribes and became betrothed, then married. It was so sweet. His mother, Henrith, gave me the most superb gold jewellery. Really scrumptious. And you see, Henrith is also Cempa's mother. They all seemed thoroughly fed up with him. Cempa, I mean. I think he's done something mouldy, and you chaps are after him; to bring him to justice, or some such thing."

With much urgency in his voice, Charles asked: "Do we have names, Reg and I?"

"Certainly. You're Rainard, and Reg is Hoggard. I'm Fynne. We belong to the Dale Folk, and our parents (both dead by this time) were Gress and Henreft."

"I thought you said that your mother-in-law was called Henreft. You're not married to another brother, I should hope."

"No, no. Elwyd's mother is Henrith. Ours was Henreft. No relation."

At this juncture, Reg lost all semblance of patience. "Who the Devil cares for all this hen nonsense. I'm going to bed, and I don't want to hear another word of this drivel. I don't give a toss what Charles does, but by God, Anne! You're marching straight back to your dormitory at the Residence in the morning, and you're not to come here again until that bloody monstrosity is safely out of this house."

Until then, I'm locking the door to that room. See if I don't! I may not be Charles's keeper, but I am most certainly **your** protector and I will not suffer this delirium any longer in Danube Square." With that, summoning up all the dignity he could muster (what with his night attire and touselled hair), A. R. Thorrock strode off to his bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

Charles sighed, shifting in the hard kitchen chair. Earnestly, he told his cousin: "I've got to get back into that bed. If Reg locks the door, as he's threatened to, it'll have to be through the window. I want to find out about this girl. As Fynne, you didn't meet a beautiful girl with long, brown hair, did you? A real heroine of romance."

"No. I don't think so ... there were loads of girls about me, all very pretty. But no-one at all like that."

"Pity. I want to **find** her. She's really giving me an itch."

"Charles!"

"Sorry, Cuz. I'm not thinking very clearly. This is all too much for my little brain to take in."

The pair sat in silence. Anne was miserable, as she wanted to return immediately to Elwyd's arms. Charles was frustrated by the incongruity of it all.

"You see my point, Anne? I can't get around the fact that all the other people, over the past few centuries, found the bed a viper-pit: **but that we didn't**. Then, on top of that, you slept the night through peacefully, and had the most marvellous, clear, realistic experience, whereas your brother and I only managed dribs and drabs of unconnected rubbish. It's all so very annoying, you see?"

"I'm mortified that Reg has taken such a hard line. It's not like him to be anything more than vaguely surprised at anything that I do. He's never before --"

Anne had stopped, almost not breathing. Charles waited. "Never before what?"

Still no response. Anne's mind was racing.

"Anne? What is it?"

Finally, the young woman breathed. "Charles! You said ... I have a funny feeling that you've hit on the answer."

"The answer? Come on, stop holding out. What's occurred to you?"

Anne jumped up, and began to pace, just as her brother had done a few minutes previously. "What time did you go to sleep? Always at night. Right? And Reg the same. But if you recall, I went to sit on that bed *in the morning*, just as dawn was breaking. That must be the key! You only lie down on that infernal bed at sunrise."

Anne halted beside the table. "Do you want to try it?"

"Do I ever! But, remember, I'm working again. I have to be up at sparrow's. Can't muck around with a new job."

Anne's eyes sparkled with mischief. "On Saturday, then. We'll lure Reg out somewhere, and you can sneak into the spare room to try out the theory. Reg will never know. I'll stay completely out of the way, so that he'll not suspect a thing. With any luck, you'll dream about your Miss Right."

"God, Cuz, that's wizard! Alright, Saturday it is."

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The wicked pair of conspirators could hardly wait until Saturday. However, Fate, ever fickle, played them a bad hand. Charles's new work required him to be on the job all Saturday morning, owing to a

sudden, unexpected change to the specifications for the current undertaking. So, Sunday was hit upon as the most likely day.

Charles Thorrock eased himself out of bed, after having turned off the alarm clock with some dexterity. Fancy having an alarm ringing on a Sunday morning. Quite unheard of. Out in the garden, the first dull rays of light were beckoning to the East. The man had allowed himself extra time in order to broach the sash window of Reg's spare room. It took some minutes to push his long frame through that difficult opening, made even more arduous by the prickly bushes just near that window. But in the end, Charles made it into the bed, albeit panting after his exertions, just as the sun rose. Far from being rancid at having his Sunday morning wrecked, the ex-sergeant grinned in expectation of once again seeing the girl. He turned his head towards the river. It wasn't called the Avon in those times. As the water flowed softly past his feet, he spat meditatively into it, watching the sputum float away.

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END OF CHAPTER III

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER IV

Six men gathered by the river. Derrie and Elwyd supplied a roan pony, three dogs, two blankets and some tin cooking utensils. Rainard and Hoggard had borrowed a grey swayback gelding from Waisser. They brought with them two hooded cloaks, what passed for fishing tackle, a coil of rope and bladders for the purpose of carrying water. The horse which Haewan and Shelf provided for the journey was a huge animal, with ponderous limbs and an enormous head. They had also brought to the river an excited dog, which Shelf continually admonished, a little meat and dried fruit, a bladder of wine and some articles of value which might later be bartered for food and shelter. Each man carried knives and in some cases, a short spear. Haewan's weapon was a stout branch, which he had lovingly trimmed and polished. Derrie's weight-bag made a fine cosh, and from Elwyd's leather belt-loop hung a lusty iron sword.

Of the six men, Derrie and Shelf were the smallest in stature. Whereas Shelf was a heavy-set man, having big, strong arms and thighs, Derrie was wiry and trim. Rainard, Hoggard and Elwyd were tall, sleek and superbly fit. These five men kept their beards trimmed with sharp knives. It was Haewan alone who wore a full, flowing brown beard. He was a very large, powerful man whose eyes had a sullen, care-worn look about them. Elwyd, Haewan and Shelf were married; the others were not.

It was hoped that Cempa's greyhound bitch, Brach, would pick up her owner's scent. For this purpose, Cempa's dirty clothes were dragged across the bitch's snout. Elwyd's neutered greyhound answered to "Tag", and the terrier was called Burr. Shelf's high-spirited mongrel was simply Docga. The horses had not been graced with names.

The only possible way to track Cempa was to allow the dogs to follow his trail, with some men walking with the dogs, while the others rode. It was also decided that a boy would accompany the warriors on their arduous journey. His role would be that of groom and dog-minder. Eorl, chief of the Mere Folk (to which tribe Shelf and Haewan belonged) called forth young Wilt, a boy of 12 winters, and organized a small pony for him. Wilt's mother gave the boy two blankets, a cleaned bull's horn, some arrows tied together with stout cord and a yew bow. There was no goodbye kiss: this fargang had become for the lad a rite of passage. With that nod from Eorl, Wilt had symbolically reached man's estate and would from now on make his quarters the "Cock Barn". He would no longer sleep in the longhouse with his parents.

To the farewells and best wishes of the onlookers, Derrie, Rainard and Hoggard strode off, being dragged forth by the barking dogs. Their luggage was strapped onto the rudimentary saddles, on which the other four now rode. Of course, the walkers did not leave go of their weapons; and Hoggard could not be parted from his shiny wooden recorder, just now stuck into his belt. Elwyd leaned down from the roan, to take one last kiss from his bride, and the fargang was on its way!

"We're lucky to have such a beautiful day for our travels," remarked Derrie, over the scurry of the dogs.

The other two nodded and grunted. Derrie was a talkative soul, whereas Rainard and his brother were at this time more taciturn.

"I made sure I brought some lucky charms with me. Never go into a fight without my hare's foot and my lucky stone." Being innately superstitious, Derrie was proud of his collection of trinkets.

"How do you know there'll be any fighting?" asked Rainard.

"Well, it'll be a funny turn if there's not. We'll be passing through some strange places, I expect, with all sorts of other-world beings lurking about. I'm of a mind that there'll be plenty of battles to keep us going."

"Blood-thirsty sod," murmured Hoggard. He was already wondering if his swine were being minded properly. He had had to leave his precious ones under the care of a 'somebody else'. But no-one ever tended them with as much devotion as he did, and Hoggard secretly worried.

"If you want blood-thirsty, you should talk to Haewan. He is a flesh-hacker after all. And have you ever seen him wrestle? By the stars, he's a formidable opponent for any man."

Again, Derrie's words were met with a grunt from the other two.

They strode on, punctuating the long march with hopes that they were indeed following the right course. Rooks, swifts and larks flew overhead, whilst robins and sparrows chirped merrily about them in the roadside bushes. They passed through vales of enormous oaks under which grass did not grow. Gingerly, they scudded down wet rocks in attempting to cross racing streams. Their boots squelched across plashy swampland overbrimming with lilies and rushes, and nettles tore at the coarse stuff of their simple clothing. Yet, for all that, the sun spilled over valley, dale and hillock, warming and cheering the companions on their trek.

Ever keen, questing the air with dirty, moist muzzles, Brach and Tag pulled the walkers across the verdant countryside. Whenever a halt was made, Cempa's garments were again wafted by Brach's nostrils, causing her to yelp and whine feverishly, and make to be off. Burr was similarly stirred up for the hunt, but all Docga wanted to do was chase after voles, otters and the occasional fox.

The riders could do no more than take up the rear, in the wake of the others. Their chance would come later. Since Shelf enjoyed whistling, the long hours passed enjoyably enough. It seemed that nobody could do much else but to take Brach's lead.

"Hold! What's that?" cried Hoggard. The men pulled up short, listening eagerly. Similarly, the dogs were alert, frozen in their stance.

"Ah! That'll be your turn, young Wilt. Show us how well you can blow that horn."

The boy replied to the noise which drifted through the woods. He stopped, as he and the men listened intently for the reply. It came, and from nearer now.

"Haewan, get out our pledges. We'll have to show them to gain safe passage."

Haewan nodded, diving into the coarse bag at his horse's side.

Wilt blew the horn again, whereupon three men strode out of the brush, with their dogs at heel. They halted, squaring shoulders and chests in the manner of confrontation. It took a couple of minutes for everyone to quiet the various dogs.

"Who be you?", asked one of the strangers, when at last he could be heard. "Friend or foe?"

Rainard shoved Tag's lead into Hoggard's hand so that he could come forward.

"Men from the South, being of the Federation of Tribes. We are Mere Folk, Hill Folk and Dale Folk." Here, Rainard pointed to Haewan. "The god Seaxneat and our Jutish ancestor Kyran protect us on this fargang. See? We bear pledges from our chiefs. We must not be stopped in this our venture."

Elwyd had dismounted, and he too came forward. "Have you seen or heard of a warrior, mounted on a large, black stallion, perhaps with a girl in tow? It is that man whom we seek."

The stranger raised his eyebrows at this, and turned to his companions. It appeared from their nods that Cempa and Netta-Vere had been spotted.

"We're just about to stop for some food and wine. Will you men join us? While we sit, you can tell us what you have seen."

The strangers nodded, leading the way down to a choice spot by a brook. Shelf overheard one of the men call the little group of Jutish men "wonderlings".

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Derrie chatted gaily as the men settled down in the afternoon sun to feast on what was left of a roasted sheep's leg, some stale bread dipped in sticky honey, and a handful each of dried apple and quince. This repast was washed down with golden wine, which the men drank straight from a brown-red bladder. Under the influence of the wine, combined with the warm sun on their faces, Rainard and his brother stretched themselves out to relax. Rainard stared up at the clouds.

"Derrie", yawned Rainard. "Can you speak in the Old Tongue?"

"Yes, if I have to. But I only know enough words to get myself into trouble, as they say. Why do you want to know that?"

"Mmm. I was just thinking that we're very likely to come across folk who don't understand our Jutish tongue. The Saxons will be alright; we know how to deal with them. However, I'm not so sure about Angles and the like. If we *really* have to communicate, then either we use sign language or try to get by with some rudimentary German."

Derrie nodded. "But if we meet some people from Roe, then we're sunk. I understand that their speech is nothing like *anything*."

Hoggard frowned. "There aren't many Roe-men left, are there?"

Derrie shrugged. "Dunno. I tell you what though. I'd rather by far meet Roe-men than those ruddy northmen we've heard of."

"Which ones?"

"The Picts." Derrie gave an artistic shudder. "I'm fairly terrified of what they'd get up to. Wild, vicious men, so I'm told. And *never* let yourself be captured by their women, I've heard. Bite your balls off."

Rainard hauled his body up from the ground and dusted his clothes off. "You're determined that we're going to have trouble, aren't you? But we have fair passage ... no-one can touch us on the way. They'd be too scared of upsetting the gods." He skidded down the bank to the brook, and washed his hands and face. "Come on, then. Better be on our way. Do you want to tell the tale, Derrie, or shall I?"

"You do it. You're on your feet."

"Well, I can't tell the tale unless you both stand up. Come, Wilt, I'll tell the tale and then we'll go."

Grudgingly, Hoggard and Derrie scrambled to their feet. The others walked up the bank. Soon, the six men and Wilt stood in a close circle.

Rainard drew a breath, and spoke seriously. "Wilt will ride his pony as normal. Haewan, Shelf and Elwyd must lead the dogs. Hoggard, you take the draughthorse, and I will ride the grey gelding. Which, of course, leaves the roan for you, Derrie. It will probably be necessary for us to find some hack work tomorrow in return for food. That being so, we must stick to the roads and lanes, in order

to find settlements where there will be food and shelter. I only hope that Brach won't lose the scent by doing that. Now, put your hands into the middle, to secure and swear your support for the good fortune of our fargang. The tale is duly told."

With great solemnity, the seven travellers placed their hands over and over each other's hands.

The nominated four men mounted their steeds and set off. Only the grey had what passed loosely for a bridle. The other horse and the ponies wore hessian-band halters. But the horsemen intended nothing faster than a jogtrot, and so this simple equipage would do. In this motley fashion, the comrades trailed after the dogs and walkers, basking in the late afternoon and evening light of a lovely Summer day.

Rainard woke. He blinked at the ceiling, walls and wardrobe. He was home; at least, at Reg's home. The watch on his left wrist indicated that the time was nearly a quarter to six, and he guessed that that indicated Sunday evening. He knew that he had slept a very long time, and that he wasn't Rainard anymore. The disappointment was shattering.

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Anne and Charles had lunch together during the week, even though the other nurses chivvied Anne that she might have a boyfriend.

Charles was in a right foul mood. "That makes 4 times I've broken into that ruddy bedroom, without Reg being any the wiser. Four times! And always the very same activities (the fargang, the wonderlings and so on), without *once* seeing the dazzling girl."

"That's bad luck! But you're sure that Elwyd is alright? Hale and hearty?"

"Yes, of course he is," responded Charles, irritably. "We're all doing our bit for England, if there is such a thing as King and Country in those mouldy old times ..."

"Well, Old Bean, you'd better slough-off the sad face, and let's come up with something positive. You know me, Chas: I just hate to be defeated."

The wicked cousins wrote out (each to be duly discarded) plan after plan: "All we need to do is to get Reg into that bally bed!" They had completely ruined a white double-damask serviette in the process, scrawled as it was with their thoughts. Whisking the napkin into his vest, Charles confidently escorted his cousin out into the open air.

Charles blew out a long breath as he lit his cigarette. "At least I feel better about things. Thank you, Anne, for cheering me up. I'm confident now that we'll come up with something," he stated, boldly.

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CHAPTER IV

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER V

Mother.

Without losing any fondness for her, it was always a dreary assignment, that monthly quest to visit Mother.

Reg Thorrock drove his sister to the Ambleside Nursing Home. It was a charming summer day for an outing, with shafts of sunlight filtering through the foliage which arched over the rustic road. On Anne's knee lay a large bunch of flowers: carnations, roses, daisies, miniature lilies and lilac, along with the obligatory greenery. This collection of flora was wrapped in a paper cone, tied at the bottom with bright green string.

Eight miles short of their destination, Reg was flagged down by an energetic young woman, standing beside a white Bentley. I write that the lady was energetic, because she jumped up and down as she urgently waved her white lace handkerchief.

"Looks like car trouble," murmured Anne, thoughtfully.

Reg merely grunted. This was perpetually his mood on having to visit Mother. He slowed down so as to bring the Austin to rest behind the Bentley.

“Damsel in distress, Reg. I say, she’s frightfully well-dressed”, Anne commented, as she wound down her window. “Hello. Can we give you a lift anywhere?”

“You wouldn’t be going to the Ambleside Nursing Home by any chance, would you?” The mobile little face was all concern.

“How funny! Yes, we’re actually visiting our mother there. How extraordinary! Please, hop in the back. It’s unlocked.” Anne could tell that her brother was less enthusiastic, and chose to ignore this fact. Anne’s generosity was met by an enchanting and beaming smile.

“Terribly decent of you. Thanks awfully.” The young lady rescued her own superb bunch of orchids from her car, locked it, and then climbed nimbly into the Austin. “Mignonette Steers-Barclay is my mono. Marvellous of you to rescue me. I keep forgetting to put petrol in the blighter.”

Reg groaned audibly.

To cover this gaff, Anne rushed into conversation with their vivacious passenger. “Anne Thorrock, and this is my brother Reggie.”

The girl frowned. “Thorrock? Thorrock? The Rock. By Jove, I remember! We’ve already met. A few weeks ago. That ball at the Albert Hall. Don’t you remember? I was there with Montie Partlington. He let his tie swim in his Windsor soup for a bet and wouldn’t stop showing off about it all night.”

Anne recalled the evening well. She had hardly missed a dance, and had had a wonderful time. “Of course we met at A. H. We were introduced by Judith Carthwright. And I seem to recall that I *did* dance with your Montie: he’s quite a card.”

"Mad and reckless," trilled the girl. "And I danced with **you**, Reggie. The Palmiera and a Fox Trot, I think. The floor was ever so crowded ... we more or less jogged on the spot."

Reg was now expected to say something. He expressed an ill-felt delight, then subsided back into the business of driving. The two girls chatted interminably. Lovely flowers, beautiful frock, hard to keep one's skin fresh in London, how difficult it was to get decent hosiery what with the continuation of rationing. That sort of thing. It seemed that Miss Steers-Barclay was to visit her grandmother, Mrs Larcombe, whom she described as a darling old toot. Reg would have ground his teeth, had not the business of parking at Ambleside taken up all his attention. The passengers disembarked, with Reg organising a time and place to collect Miss Steers-Barclay for the return journey.

Alone with Anne, as they marched along spotless corridors, Reg vented his annoyance. "I say, Anne, I couldn't have put up with that infernal girl much longer. What a silly clunch she is!"

"I'll sit in the back with her going back. Then we can chatter away to our heart's content and not annoy you. At least she has a delicious laugh."

Reg snorted. "Like a damned tinkling bell. My God!"

"Well, dear, a lot of people would love to hear it. Very merry and jolly."

Not much later, Reg and Anne sat dolefully beside their frail mother, who had recently become bed-ridden due to her advancing debility. The wall clock ticked loudly in every conversational lacuna. Reg wanted to fidget with something. However, all that he had to hand was the delicate gardenia-patterned cup and saucer which Nurse Smithers had handed to him. The clinking of the china was more irritating than the wretched clock. And all that they had given him to eat was a couple of floury scones, meagrely scraped with butter.

Anne rose from her straight-backed chair. "I'll just pop around to see Polly, Mother. Won't be a mo." Polly and Anne had trained as nurses together. It was through Polly's good offices that Mrs Thorrock had acquired such a charming room at Ambleside.

Mrs Thorrock's old eyes followed her daughter as she left the room. "Are you still there, Angus?"

Reg squirmed at the use of his first Christian name. "Can I fetch anything for you, Mother?"

"Where's Anne gone?" The tone was petulant, long-suffering.

"One of the nurses is her friend. She's catching up on all the gossip. Do you want me to close the window a bit? Are you in a draught?"

"No, no. It's a fine day. Let the air in, Angus."

Just then, Reg caught site of Mignonette and an older woman, who must certainly be Mrs Larcombe, strolling arm-in-arm through the garden. They could hardly walk for laughing. Mrs Larcombe constantly dabbed at her eyes with her hanky, while her grand-daughter threw back her head to laugh out loud. He was just about to call out for a bit of shoosh, when his mother stirred.

"Nice to hear people enjoying themselves, isn't it? That young lady has a positive bell-like quality to her laugh. Why, she must cheer-up everyone she meets, that one."

"Er, yes indeed. Wonderful medicine, laughter." Reg forced a chuckle, which brought a rather searching look from his parent. It seemed that she was studying him; trying to work him out.

"Where are you living these days, Angus? You were away for a while, weren't you?"

"Yes. Yes, I was away fighting in the War. But don't worry. It's all over now. And I'm back home for good."

"Home? Where is home? Are you living in Danube Square?"

"Yes. That's right. Trying to keep the garden in shape. And Charles is living there too, now. You remember Dad's nephew Charles?"

"Charles?"

"Yes. Dad's brother Ernie's son. He's been away fighting as well." Mother wasn't at all understanding. "You remember my cousin Charles. Came to stay with us during the Summer hols any number of times when we were lads. Played cricket with him in the park, day after day."

The elderly lady stared in some confusion at the opposite wall, and picked at the hem of the bedsheet.

"Are you looking after Tuppy? Make sure he has plenty of water, and mind that you clean out his dish every other day."

Reg opened his mouth to speak, but closed it quickly. His Yorkshire terrier, Tuppy, had died years ago. What on earth did one say at a time like this? Where the hell was Anne?

"Tell your Dad about pruning the elm trees. Don't let them get too lanky."

There was no answer for this. Reg simply sat in dreadful gloom. His beloved Dad had passed away when he was only a young teenager. Pleurisy. The business of bedside hospital visits had been the catalyst for Anne becoming a nurse. The same thing had put Reg Thorrock off hospitals for life.

“Where is Dad? Is he here? Where’s Anne? Did she and Dad go home without saying goodbye?”

Tears began to trickle down the dear old cheeks which Reg had once loved to kiss. What a crisis! Murmuring something about getting a fresh pot of tea, Reg launched himself into the corridor. Another ripple of delicious merriment floated in through the window. Reg wanted to throw the teapot at that infernal girl.

“Hi, Anne! Where the devil are you?” His shouting brought disapproving looks from several elderly gents. One lady tut-tutted audibly at the outburst. “Anne!”

His sister and Polly appeared, but seemed hardly disturbed by Reg’s garbled description of Mrs Thorrock’s lapse.

“She’s just tired, that’s all. I’ll give her some tonic”, Polly said, consoling Reg with a pat on the arm.

And so, for the next hour and a half, Reg suffered in malevolent silence as he drove back to South London. It had been decided that Miss Steers-Barclay would be driven back to her London flat in the Austin. He lifted his eyes heavenward upon learning that the young lady motorist had already rung home and organised for her father’s chauffeur and the garden boy to take a can of petrol to the Bentley and then drive it back on her behalf. It seemed that this spoiled wench would far rather enjoy a comfortable chinwag with Miss Thorrock than motor back to London herself.

Thorrock was in a brown study. During the course of the journey, Reg gleaned the unwelcome information that he and Anne were to dine with Mignonette’s family at The Manor in Kent. And other treats seemed to be in store as well. The gruesome truth was that Reg would benefit enormously from any social intercourse with the Steers-Barclay set. This could prove to be the kind of introduction to society’s ‘doers’ for which any self-respecting journalist would commit murder. For Reg the man, Mignonette Steers-Barclay was a stumer. For Reg as newspaperman, this chance meeting with the spoiled beauty was a Godsend for his career.

This business of his mother losing her marbles was devastating, even if Anne shrugged it off as expected behaviour. Along with that was the ruddy dream experience, which Reg would never forget. Then, too, the interview with Rowntree had been more than a trifle draining. No, all in all, things were turning grizzly, there was no getting around it!

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"Look here, Reg: are you any good or not? Because if you are, they certainly need new blood down at The Telegraph. I'll drop a word in there on your behalf. Know the editor. That is to say, my brother was up at Oxford with his brother. "

"Thank you very much, Sir. That's very good of you."

"I'll send a word to Keith, and he'll give you a buzz, I expect. Then the rest is up to you."

"Yes. Thank you. Most kind. I'll look forward to that."

After a sumptuous dinner, Reg had found himself ensconced in the library of Sir Peter Steers-Barclay. Both guest and host were enjoying a snifter of mellow French brandy in that softly-lit room. Amidst banks of new books (which had never been opened) stood expensive artefacts and curios. The room spoke more of the owner's bankroll than of his taste. However, Lieutenant Thorrock (ever the Philistine) did not even pretend to know anything of the Fine Arts. So it turned out that Reg appeared to be as comfortable in these surroundings as Sir Peter was.

Not only that. Sir Peter had made it quite evident that he enjoyed Thorrock's company. At the dinner table, when given the right encouragement (mental and liquid), Reg had opened up to tell the assembled group some of his less ribald war experiences. A superb raconteur, Reg kept his audience enthralled and thoroughly entertained. From this, Mignonette's father had deduced that his likeable guest might make a first-rate journalist. It would be no trouble to take this young chap under his wing, to further his career prospects.

The two men were found to be studying a copy of a well-known work of art, talking rubbish as they tried ineffectually to make out the artist's intentions, when Lady Deidre, Mignonette's brother and Anne Thorrock drifted into the room. Sir Peter was momentarily distracted by his wife's babble. It was a chance for Reg to converse with his sister.

"Meant to ask you. Do you remember something about a do on Saturday night? The Peterborough thingo."

"Yes," Anne responded, wistfully. "The invite is pinned to the noticeboard in the kitchen."

"Going?"

"No ... I'll probably be working."

"Do you good."

Anne shrugged, listlessly. "I was speaking to Charles on the telephone last evening. He said that Scotland is very pretty and not too cold. Well, not at this time of year, anyway. Other than that, he feels like he's living in a pond."

"What did you say? In a *pond*?"

"Yes. All he does is work. He's just a body. He can't make sense of the world anymore, so he's just a mere pond-creature, flapping about. All the time, he's living in the world of the Anglo-Saxons."

"But that's ludicrous! Needs to snap out of it."

"Well, I'm not much better. All I do is work and feel miserable for Elwyd."

Reg looked askance at his sister as the others lured them into more general conversation. Pond-life ... Elwyd ... Where the hell would this bloody business end?

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END OF CHAPTER V

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER VI

It happened to a lot of men.

The worker became the soldier at the outbreak of war. The worker's job had to be given to someone else. To someone who was not going to the Front. To someone who would marry and start a family and talk incessantly about how "grand" it was that our boys were doing their bit to fight Gerry. However, when the erstwhile worker shambled back to his old position, the boss was disinclined to shift the married man out of his cubbyhole just for the old sweat. And many men were disgruntled and peeved as a result of this seeming unfairness.

Well, Charles Thorrock's new boss wasn't like that at all. He was more than happy to put on his payroll any able-bodied lad who'd previously signed up to fight for King and Country. More than happy. "For, here's the thing, Sergeant Thorrock, we're on the cusp of an expansion, a boom in building, a rising-up in industry. I'll need good men around me, for sure. And you look to me like a very likely young man."

Thus, Charles was back in the carpentry game as if he had never left it. And Edinburgh was to all intents and purposes a very beautiful city. The jewel in the crown. But not all of Edinburgh was the stuff of oil paintings. And especially not in summer.

Charles was temporarily situated at Mrs Gavies's boarding house. He was in Edinburgh to work on some newly-renovated flats. Something to do with a friend of this chap who met the boss in Florence about ... Oh, it doesn't matter ...

On the way to and from Mrs Gavies's, Charles saw the sad, earthy side of the big city. Dirty children in ragged clothes playing in the street, dwellings dingy and run-down. There were slums in London, too; it was just that Charles never put himself in the way of passing by them.

Riding along in the gloomy bus to his workplace, Charles wrote a reminder to himself to buy Anne a birthday present. He took a different bus to Jennings's Store during his lunch hour, sitting by a window to take in the sights, which proved much more pleasant than he was used to so far. On this weekday, crowds of people were taking advantage of the warm sunshine during the lunch hour. Patterned frocks and summer hats were paraded up and down the footpaths, where groups of men and women chatted gaily. Haggard men, injured during the War, tried to piece together their futures. Some of them fell right back into civilian life, wearing their wounds as badges of honour. So, they merrily joined the throng. Others, like the down-at-heel chap who was begging for money, stood on his particular corner, despising the civilization which had so ruined his life. At last, the bus pulled up in front of the imposing department store, disgorging its passengers for their shopping expedition.

Being ever conscious of the hour, Charles quickly made his way to the fourth storey, where linen, china and crystal were for sale. He chummed up with a matronly saleswoman (tastefully outfitted in black wool crepe and pearls) who cheerfully helped him to make his purchase. He finally settled on a figurine, in the style of an 18th century young lady. The *piece de resistance* was carefully dispatched in a swathe of tissue paper, then brown paper and string. Thorrock pocketed same, rather pleased with himself, then headed back, knowing that he was well ahead of time.

The lift driver was an obnoxious weasel. Charles secretly loathed this type of man, who had never set foot in the arena of war. Imposingly dressed in an over-decorated uniform, replete with shiny buttons, the man gave himself an officious, self-important air. And all he did all day was drive a bloody lift! Inside the cramped compartment, he over-pronounced each little storey speech, as if his

passengers were deaf morons. Then, with the opening of the doors, he would step outside and announce pompously whether the lift were for "Up" or "Doon". His bossiness towards the poor souls near the lift door bordered on rudeness; Thorrock wanted to give him a bunch of fives right on the snout.

By the "Fust Flure" (Ladies' Apparel), the load had reached its capacity, with Thorrock squished right into the back wall. Luckily, being so much taller than the other occupants, he could still see the action in the store. It was just as the doors were being closed that he spotted the high-spirited Jutish girl again; the one he'd seen on the rough-coat pony. Dressed in sombre black, and carrying a small booklet, she walked past, weaving her way between the numerous display counters.

Charles jerked forward, but was still pinned to the wall. His heart racing, he thought that this damned lift with its nauseating driver would **never** reach the "Groaned Flure". Aching, sick with apprehension, he forced his way out of the crowd, making quickly for the nearby staircase. Surely he could have remained in the lift for its ascent; but he feared being trapped on it. Taking the stairs three at a time, he launched himself into Ladies' Apparel, darting about, searching for his mystery lady. Display stands decked with female clothing, fabricated mannequins donned with the latest styles, display counters and meandering shoppers all seemed to conspire against him. Thorrock could not see her. In desperation, he tried again, taking a bearing from the position of the lift, and the direction in which she had been heading. And he was justly rewarded for fortuitously utilising logic. She was slightly bent over a counter, filling out a sales docket. Not much out of breath, but with heart racing, he sprinted to her side.

"Er ... I'm looking for a present for a lady. For a lady who has a birthday."

Surprised, and appearing not best pleased, the girl quickly looked up. She was not his ancient equestienne, but like enough to her to cause Charles's world to stop turning. In the gentlest of voices, she spoke with a winsome Gaelic lilt, and her voice was music to the man's ears.

"Oh, weel. We have the finest selection of handbags and leather goods in Edinburgh. Or did you mean to purchase gloves, or a scarf, perhaps?"

The fire which danced in the Jutish heroine's eyes was missing from her soft, hazel ones. Charles instantly remembered that girl who had rescued him, when he was only seconds from death. There had been a blazing glint of pride in that lady's bewitching eyes ...

"It's for my cousin. She's a nurse. A pair of gloves would be perfect."

"Weel, we usually fit the gloves to the lady's hand. By any chance, do you happen to know the glove size for the lady?"

Charles Thorrock stared at the shop-girl's face, drinking in the beauty before him. It was a fair cop -- he had absolutely no intention of beginning this sweet romance on a lie.

"Look ... I don't really want anything. I've already bought her a pretty statue thing. Cost me a fiver. No, I really wanted to meet **you**. I say, when do you get off work? Can I meet you outside? Perhaps I could see you home?"

The girl tried to retreat, shocked by such an open attack.

"I saw you from the lift," Charles pursued. "**Had** to meet you. But don't worry ... I'm not mad. May I take you out to dinner to explain?"

The girl was completely flummoxed. "Sir ... I'm afraid ... Please, Sir. My boss wouldn't like me to ..."

Thorrock persisted in the face of this hesitant resistance. "Listen! I'll get back to work, and then, when you knock off, I'll be waiting for you outside, on the footpath, by the front door. How's that sound? Smashing!"

Frightened, confused, the girl nervously excused herself and dashed off to serve another customer. There was nothing for Charles to do but beat a path back to his infernal work, which once he had enjoyed, but which now was keeping him from being with his love. Yet for all this, he knew, and would always know, that although the shop girl resembled his beloved wench in face and form, she was **not** the brown-haired girl of his imagination. That magical, indefinable spirit of the Anglo-Saxon was missing here. No love could last when it was based only on the superficial. Charles realized that, but chose to press on regardless.

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The extremely well-groomed Miss Steers-Barclay fidgetted about, rather than "worked". She was employed (at a handsome stipend) in London's finest fashion house. Her duties included arranging hot-house flowers in enormous vases, speaking mellifluously into a microphone as high-nosed mannequins sauntered along the catwalk, and talking intelligently to overseas reps on the telephone. Her shorthand was lousy, but between herself and her employer (Lucy "Dragon" Soames-Harbell), the company's correspondence was always sent out in good order.

On one rainy afternoon, in the Ladies washroom, as she stared at her lovely face which was reflected in the grotty mirror, Mignonette wondered if she might be coming down with a cold and sore throat. Her eyes were runny ... Of a sudden, she thought: Wasn't a hot brew made from rich, red rowan berries supposed to be marvellous for the throat? She felt it! The sudden bodily transference to an ancient forest, where she and a young man reached up to grasp handfuls of tart rowan fruit, in order to concoct just such a mixture.

Days later, having **not** caught the dreaded cold, Nettie telephoned Reg. She was sunny and girlish; he was quite chuffed at the call, grinning at her bubbling conversation (until it transpired that all Nettie really wanted to discuss with Reg was her proposed outfit for the Peterborough shindig.)

Reg smothered a vast yawn. "Sounds lovely. You'll look a vision. I'll make sure that your photograph is featured prominently on the Ladies' Pages of your father's rag. Well, I'd better ring-off now. I have to --"

"Reg!" came the urgent plea, "Before you hang up, there's something I need to know. This old Anglo-Saxon place you've slightly mentioned ... was I there, at all?"

"No. No you weren't."

"Oh ... " The spoiled heiress was disappointed. "Just wondering ..."

"Why? Why do you ask, Nettie?"

"I seem to drift off to another place, when least expected. Yesterday, for instance, I watched you wringing the neck of a large fowl. It was just a PHWTT!, in-and-out of memory flash. And before that, you and I were busy gathering berries in a perfectly divine forest."

Reg could not make it out. "Ah ... well, wishful thinking, perhaps? My blathering might have egged you on ... Good night, my dear."

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But there **was** something ...

A boy, a boy of about 12 winters, spoke to Reg just as he had finished changing his paper and carbon in his Remington typewriter. Reg was smoking (trying to do three things at once, as usual) when the boy suddenly appeared, asking him if Queen Nettie had finished making the poultice for the swayback's near fetlock. But it was the work of a mere moment. The boy just wasn't there! ... Silly really ...

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

If this had anything to do with Anne and Charles, Reg refused to admit it, and did not discuss these random visions with them. He simply put it all out of his mind.

For goodness sake! He had slept in the devil bed only the once, and his momentary visions had been jumbled, unfathomable. This nonsense of Charles and Anne was simply that: nonsense.

Alf Timms ran a corner store not far from Danube Square. That was where Reg stopped off every couple of evenings to purchase his usual packet of Craven A, a box of matches, and perhaps a small paper twist of fruit pastilles. On one drizzly Monday afternoon during that memorable Summer, Reg was Alf's only customer. They chatted about this and that, quite like old friends, as Reg made his purchases. Then, with a friendly wave, Reg wished Alf a pleasant evening. He turned. There was an older man in perfectly horrid clothes and stinking like nothing on earth, barring his way. The man was quite dry, which was puzzling in such dreary weather. Aggressively, the man leaned in towards Reg.

"Seaxneat stole those three pins from Glenowan, and gave them to Cempa, as a bribe. They have very magical properties, he was told. A lure ... a bribe ... do you follow my drift here?" The chap leaned in even closer. This time, the man's voice was even more menacing. "And Glenowan will want them back, think on!"

Reg stood open-mouthed. There was no man blocking his egress from the shop. There was no evil-smelling doom-sayer talking in a rough whisper, with wild eyes blazing with excitement.

Reg whisked around to check if Timms had also spotted the interloper. But Alf was busy, tidying and sorting the shelves. He smiled and winked at Reg. "See you later, then!", waving jovially.

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Joan Symington could not believe how romantic it had been that such a heroic young English gentleman (a Sergeant in the British Army, no less) should run at full pelt through Jennings's emporium to meet her, after having spotted her from the lift. Her maiden heart fluttered with the thrill of it all. Not since her fiancé had been alive, in the early days of the War, had she felt that same eagerness which a new love affair renders. The pity was that his job in Edinburgh had wound up. Theirs would become a long-distance romance, because Edinburgh was so very far from London. Of course, if they married, she would move South, to be with him. That's what women did; they travelled about to be with their men ...

Meanwhile, Joan's new amour lay in pyjama bottoms on his back in his room at Mrs Gavies's boarding house, smoking, staring at the ceiling. There had to be a way to find out more about the wonderlings and their fargang. Nothing at this moment made any sense at all. Charles decided that Joan might just as well try the phantom bed, if only Reg would permit it. Then, surely, the tale might progress instead of being stuck in a bloody groove, as it now was. Agggh! All he knew was that he (Charles) was Rainard, Reg Hoggard and Anne Fynne. Alright, and now the nameless girl (not a wonderling as such, but so obviously a part of the story) had also been discovered: Joan. But who were Elwyd, Derrie and the others? Who was Cempa? And the mystical Queen?

Charles rolled onto his side so that he could grind his cigarette into the ashtray, which sat on the bedside table, along with his loudly ticking alarm clock, a naked electric bulb on a stand, and a glass of water. He saw Joan sitting on the bare back of that ugly grey pony, all unkempt as it was. She reached for him: "Quick, Rainard!"

... No she didn't. That wasn't Joan. That wasn't Joan at all ...

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

END OF CHAPTER VI

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER VII

The dance floor was stifling. Too many people, too much smoke, a blinding bevy of diamond-encrusted beauties, an over-supply of grog, and the best Swing music in London. A roaring triumph, in fact. Sir Callum Peterborough and his daft third wife could not have been more pleased, to have hosted such a brilliant affair.

Nevertheless, Reg Thorrock was soon found to be weaving a path through the throng to the balcony. There, he had hoped to find fresh air, along with an unsurpassed view of the River Thames at night. That had been his intention, at any road. In reality, he only made it as far as the bar, for he suddenly heard a very familiar voice above the ruckus. Whipping his head around, Reg's eyes focused owlshly on an animated little group of merry men.

Reg gasped: "Beau? Beau Beauchamps?"

The tall chap broke off in the middle of a seedy anecdote, turning towards the interloper. The bloke squinted into the dimly-lit ballroom. "Reg? My God! Is that Rocky Reg?"

"Well done, Old Fellow! You got it in one!"

The two young men shook hands very warmly, patting each other's shoulder as they did so.

Arthur simply beamed with pleasure at the sight of Rocky Reg. "How the Devil are you? Where have you sprung from? I thought that you lived in Devonshire."

"No, no," Reg expostulated. "You're thinking of Rabbit Thompson. Good to meet up with you again. How's the golf game?"

Arthur Beauchamps gave a disgusted growl. "Aargh! Don't remind me of that mucking game. Drive a fellow to drink. Speaking of which ..."

Even in that noisy ballroom, where it was very difficult to make oneself heard, the two friends found a spot where they could drink and converse in relative peace. They had acquired for themselves a large jug of ale, and a couple of suitably capacious glasses. Beau excused himself politely from the other people who would now not hear the punchline of his joke.

"So, Reggie, what have you been up to?"

Reg told the closest friend he had in the world of his newspaper job, and of his acquaintance with Miss Steers-Barclay.

"Well done, Rocky. Pretty little thing, and she's from a very well-heeled stable."

"Ah, now that's the problem, isn't it? I'm more or less stuck with her, because she has introduced me (through her loving Daddy) to all sorts of Great People. Looks like I'll be moving up in the world: Fleet Street beckons ... Well, that filly used to get on my bally nerves, Beau. Don't mind her so much now, however."

Beauchamps laughed. "Don't sound so gloomy. It could be worse. She's alright, is Nettie SB; always laughing and merry. I've not seen her since ... is she here with you?"

Reg waved vaguely in the direction of the dance floor. "Busy dancing. Loves to dance, does our girl. Does it rather well, too. But I got sick of all the crush, and left her to it."

They drank on, sharing tipsy recollections of former conquests. Past them swirled London's finest. These joyful people seemed to gallop in their haste to make up for the gaiety of which Herr Hitler had robbed them. War injuries, rationing, the destruction caused by Gerry's bombs. All this was pushed aside in a madcap frenzy to 'eat, drink and be merry'.

"... but surely that was in Palestine, Reg?" slurred Beauchamps.

Thorrock shrugged. "Might have been. Can't remember."

The pair were silent again, as a myriad thoughts trundled through their beer-soaked brains.

Reg stirred himself. "Meant to ask you ... did you have someone waiting for you?"

"A special girl, you mean? Not a chance." There was a wealth of regret in Beauchamps's voice. "You?"

"Thank God, no! By the by, did you hear what happened to poor old Dobson?"

"Yes. I did hear something ... came back and his wife had waltzed off with some foreign chap. Not cricket, eh Reg?"

"Certainly not." The two men drank in sullen silence, peeved on behalf a man they no longer cared about. Women were toe-rags, every one of them! Couldn't find a decent female in London for ready money.

Reg snapped out of his reverie. "But where are my manners? I've not asked you about **you** yet, Beau. What of you? Are you back in mufti?"

"No. I'm still in the Army. No ... I was seconded to General Gilbert's staff. Diplomats at large. Things rather shaky in the East, you know. Plus, we've been heavily involved in the Peace negotiations, and what have you. Lots of travel to Paris, Vienna and so on."

"Blimey! How in the name of all that's wonderful did you snaffle that?"

Beauchamps chuckled. "Father heads up the Foreign Department, so here I am."

"You lucky bastard! Still a lieutenant?"

"I've been promoted to Captain, Old Chap."

Reg slammed his beer glass down abruptly. "Do you mean to tell me that I have to salute you now?"

Arthur nodded, laughing. "Yes, you do."

At that, Reg made a very rude gesture to his friend. "That's all the salute you'll get from me, Boyo."

The pair roared with laughter, slapping each other on the back.

"My God, Reg, it's **marvellous** to catch up with you like this. You'd better scribble down your address and telephone number on this card. No earthly use you trying to contact me, for I'm never sure where I'll be from one minute to the next. Could be Darwin, could be Timbuktu!"

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It was a moonlit night. Two young women walked briskly on London footpaths.

The heels of their pumps clicked on the pavement as they scurried along. Both ladies wore light summer coats over their evening gowns. They had both agreed wholeheartedly that the vast sums of money spent on their outfits, accessories and hair-dos had been well worth it. Their laughter and light-hearted chatter echoed about them, making them feel important, watched-for.

After slipping into Bates's for cocktails, the pair were now headed for the theatre. Suddenly, one of the ladies seized the other by the arm.

"We ought to dash across and have a look at the sapphire ring which I've picked out, Anne. So elegant! Mick wants to get something really simple. But don't you think that's just too stupid for words? Who on earth is going to notice a plain engagement ring?"

"Be careful. He may not be able to afford a swanky ring."

Nurse Benson laughed at that. "Oh, he's loaded. Made a pile during the War. Ran funny little businesses on the side. Quite shrewd, really. He can jolly well buy me the sapphire, or I'll withhold services."

"Barbara! Are you only marrying Michael for his money? Tsk, tsk."

"He's alright as a person, I suppose. I wouldn't marry a complete scoundrel, you know, just to be rich. It's across the road here somewhere, or perhaps down a bit."

The young ladies scampered across the street, narrowly avoiding being hit by a cab (whereby the driver tooted at them). Nurse Benson dragged her friend to a very exclusive jeweller's shop which turned out to be quite close to their theatre destination. The girls' faces were soon pressed against the glass.

"See? That big sapphire in the third row, all on its own. What a corker! What do you think?"

"Probably four figures," mused Anne.

"You bet! And worth every penny. That's my little baby. I'm itching to get it on my finger."

"Barb, I've never thought of you as being mercenary."

"Oh, grow up! The War changed everything. Throw "love" out the door, I say. My aunt raised me; it was all cheese-parings and thrift. I've never forgotten that. Well, what I want is social standing and wealth. And I don't mean to marry without it. I want stylish clothes, lovely hair-dos, furs and a Roller. It all goes with the new Post-War lifestyle."

"Why the devil did you become a nurse, then, if you wanted something completely different?"

Barbara Benson shrugged. "Had to do something in the meantime. Plus, I got to meet plenty of rich officers during the War through my nursing."

Anne looked at the deep blue stone which winked malevolently back at her. Her friend's voice seemed almost disembodied.

"What about you, Anne? Is your future looking rosy? Wouldn't you just adore to have a flashy stone like that one sparkling on your ring finger?"

Anne shook her head. "Fat chance. My only love died a very long time ago."

Nurse Benson clicked her tongue. "Bad luck. Sorry, I just didn't know ... What was he? Army, Navy or Air Force?"

"None of those. It was way before the War started." Anne made as if to move off. But something caught her eye ...

"Oh ... you must have been only a kid, then?"

Absently, staring at another section of the jeweller's window, Anne agreed: "Yes, I was sixteen, I think."

Nurse Benson wrapped it up with her: "That was awfully young. You'll get over it. Come on! We've only a couple of minutes before the curtain goes up."

Anne spoke over the top of her friend. "No I won't ever get over it ... I'll catch up ... you go ahead."

Anne Thorrock stood quite still, only just remembering to breathe. There, in a dimly-lit corner of the front display window of Forrest & Hill lay Fynne's wedding jewels. Blinking, Anne made sure that her eyes weren't deceiving her. No ... it was certainly the Jutish set of finely twisted gold. It was there -- right there in the window! There could be no mistake. Fynne's ring, bracelet and necklace were all laid out on their bed of cream velvet.

As a result of this rare discovery, Nurse Thorrock's arrival at the theatre was rather late. In the dark, during the first act, Anne had to scramble across knees, apologizing remorsefully to the other patrons as she did so. In the background, the actors were holding forth. Anne's friends whispered their admonishments as she joined them, thus leaving our poor young friend to sit in that darkened theatre with her thoughts. She followed none of the intricate plot, heard none of the risqué badinage between the leading players, and nor did she enjoy the catchy tunes which all the other patrons so loved. The magical night out to which Anne had looked forward for so long, had turned to dust. Anne spent the entire time trying to reckon the price of her jewels, and how she could dig up the money to pay for them.

The next three days were hell. Nurse Benson could not remember the name of the jewellery shop. "Something and Something" was all that she came up with. So there was little possibility in telephoning. Anne became bitterly frustrated. There was no break. Her nursing duties cruelly kept her tied to the hospital, with no escape. All the hope that she could cling to was that the articles might still be for sale. The weekend was spent in this same gloomy anticipation.

Finally, on Monday morning, Anne was free to retrace her steps to the theatre finding the store of Forrest & Hill without difficulty. Not pausing for a second, she launched into the shop, where a thin, bird-like man wearing spectacles and what appeared to be a permanent smile, raised his eyebrows.

"Excuse me. You had a gold set in the window. I saw it the other night. A ring, bracelet and necklace. In gold: very fine strands of gold."

"Yes?"

"Well, I'd like to see them, with a view to purchasing. Please. It ... They're of great sentimental value."

Mr Hill came around the counter. He spoke in a very particular, 'precious' manner. "I see. Perhaps madam can point out the pieces for inspection?"

Together, the jeweller and his lovely client stood at the window, peering in. The jewels in question were gone.

"They were there," indicated Anne, sadly. "But they're gone now. I do hope they've not been sold."

Mr Hill looked sharply about at all the other beautiful pieces on display, making tapping noises with his tongue. All of a sudden, Anne became alarmed, thinking that she might have been 'tricked', just as Charles had been, when he had spotted the girl on horseback in George Street.

Voice all trembling, Anne asked: "But you did have such a set, did you not? I'm not going mad, am I?"

Mr Hill, rather than being fazed by the nature of the question, gently guided the girl to a chair. "I may know of the pieces to which you refer. Would you mind very much awaiting my return, Madam? I must confer with Mr Forrest."

The two eminent London jewellers spoke together sotto voce. As they conferred, Anne felt that she was sure to faint for the very first time in her life.

When Mr Hill approached, he held his hands gripped together. "Not the best news, I'm afraid, Madam. Yes, we did have such a set as you've described (unspeakably lovely, they were!), but unfortunately, Lord Peter Sainsbury bought it on Wednesday last as a betrothal gift for his fiancée. I'm sorry, my dear."

Anne stared at Mr Hill. She would **not** black out. She would not! Mr Forrest (a larger, ruddy-faced man) stepped forward.

"Of course, we do not under normal circumstances reveal the purchaser's name at Forrest & Hill. Client confidentiality is paramount in this business, Madam, be assured. However, as it happens, the well-regarded ladies' magazine "Fashion House" is featuring the Sainsbury engagement on its worthy pages over the next week. So, all of London will be able to view the jewellery in glorious Photogravure in that august magazine."

The thing which Madam had most dreaded, the appalling truth, now hit her. Never mind how much Mr Hill and Mr Forrest smiled smugly. At that very moment in time, sane, rational Anne completely lost her reason.

"But they're mine! Henrith brought them into the Bower, wrapped in a clout, and Elwyd secured the necklace around my neck. The ring fitted me perfectly. They ... they were my wedding present."

Both Mr Hill and Mr Forrest glanced at each other speakingly, then jointly rose to the challenge. They dealt magnificently with this ghastly situation. The young woman's wild sobs were calmed, a refreshing glass of lemon water was procured for her, and some sense of decorum eventually returned to the prestigious shop.

"You know, the pieces were probably copies. Only copies! It is quite possible that you could persuade the goldsmith to produce just such another set. Quite possible indeed," Mr Forrest offered.

"Do you happen to know --"

"We are almost certain that Monsieur Andre Harnel of Paris wrought those beautiful articles," suggested Mr Hill. "They bear all the traits of his work. And, you know, his specialty is the reproduction of ancient artefacts, as would only be found in a reputable museum."

Both gentlemen agreed with each other on this point, nodding and bowing. "Furthermore," added Mr Forrest, "The library is sure to have copious amount of material (books and the like) on so celebrated an artist as Monsieur Harnel. That would make a most interesting and illuminating study, would it not, Mr Hill?"

"Indeed, indeed, Mr Forrest. An excellent and timely suggestion, if I may be so bold."

Again, the two men smiled obsequiously at each other, bowing as they stood before Anne, for all the world as if she were royalty.

"Thank you so much. You two gentlemen have been more than kind, and I apologize once again from breaking down as I did."

"Not at all, dear lady."

"I have to imagine that there's no chance of Lord Sainsbury's parting with the copy. Of course, I'll camp out at his door until he sees me; until I plead my case. But I'll also look up Andre Harnel, just as you suggested. He might be willing to --"

The two gentlemen were running a business after all. Luckily, there had been no other customer in the superbly outfitted store whilst Anne was in her 'state'. Now, however, a couple of very well-dressed matrons swanned in, and Anne's plight was forgotten. Her two cavaliers drifted off, with out a further word to her. So, Nurse Thorrock calmly rose from the chair, and went on her way.

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END OF CHAPTER VII

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER VIII

Arthur Beauchamps, slightly on the go, was really not in the mood for whoring with his companions. With a friendly wave and some earthy farewells, he wandered about along the banks of the River Thames. Humming to himself, hands firmly pushed into his pockets, Arthur simply drifted. Watching the play of lights, he eventually went for a quiet drink in what appeared to be a snug inn, nestled in a grove of lindens. After listening to a weather-beaten man who was holding forth about the boring old importance of good guttering, Captain Beauchamps reached for his wallet. There, twisting back and forth in his fingers, was Reg's card, bearing Thorrock's phone number.

There was a phone on the wall, in a corner. And Arthur had some coins jingling in his trouser pocket. His call was answered by a woman, who indicated that Thorrock would return home soon. Reg must be married, thought Beauchamps. Not surprising, really, he was a good chap. Finding a taxicab to take him to South London, in no time at all, Arthur was knocking on the door.

"Good evening. I rang before ... about calling on Reg Thorrock. Would he be in yet?"

The pretty young woman who held the door ajar, stared at him in a kind of mesmerised trance. She took a step towards him, saying: "Elwyd!" and then, without fanfare, the girl collapsed at his feet in a dead faint.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Arthur was utterly confounded. What to do? Stay and help? Run away? What a lovely girl, who might well be Reg's wife. The man looked about, lost. He'd better do something ...

Perhaps this lovely creature was in the pudding club? After a moment's hesitation, Arthur scooped her into his arms and carried her to the couch, where he chafed her hands. Then, he searched about for something to dip in water so that he could bathe the lady's brow. A tea-towel, doused under running water would do the trick!

Beauchamps squatted beside the couch, carefully dabbing the wet tea-towel on the young woman's brow. She really was a very lovely girl. Probably in an interesting situation, which would explain the fainting fit. There was no wedding ring; but that was hardly surprising in these times. People had got up to some incredible hijinx at the end of the War. What on Earth had Reggie said about his love-life and his women at that Peterborough shindig?

After some minutes, the girl stirred and opened her grey eyes. She turned towards her rescuer and looked straight into his eyes. Anticipating this revival, Beauchamps had prepared himself. He would blithely explain to her the collapse, and how he had stayed with her to do the right thing.

However, hardly had the words framed on his lips when Anne reached out and touched his hair, stroking his cheek. Unshed tears moistened the corners of her eyes. There was something worshipful and adoring in the way she looked at Arthur Beauchamps's face. He drank in her beauty, marvelling at the love in her gaze. She murmured in the Old Language: "Elwyd ... you have returned to me. Now we can have an ordinary marriage, like everyone else, and I can live with you and your folk."

There followed an awkward silence. The young officer was stunned, confused. He was completely nonplussed. Whatever strange English dialect the girl was spouting, the meaning behind her words was abundantly clear!

Anne blinked at Elwyd, but the setting seemed to be wrong. In modern English, she whispered:

"Have you come back from the fargang?"

"Er, sorry, but I think you're mistaken ... You ... you fainted, you see. Are you feeling more the thing now?"

Dreamily, Anne nodded.

The man cleared his throat, trying for a light tone: "Um ... may I know your name?"

Anne blinked. She flicked her eyes about the room, with realization washing over her. She seemed suddenly devastated: resignation and regret altered her demeanour, and she sighed pathetically.

"Are you Reg's wife, then?"

"Sister."

"Ah!" The man, still crouched beside the girl, stood, to stretch his long legs. Then he sat on the edge of the couch. "Well, Miss Thorrock, how –"

"My name is Anne. Nurse. 25 years old, born –"

Beauchamps laughed. "Rightio. Anne, how many fingers am I holding up?"

"Oh, I know that trick. Two fingers, Sir."

"Good. Now, please watch my finger as it moves. Try to follow it with your eyes." Anne passed this test with flying colours, her face now suffused with mirth.

"Well, Miss Anne Thorrock, you seem A-OK to me."

"Ready to take on Der Führer, do you think?"

"Yes, quite."

"I'm still feeling a bit woozy, I'm afraid. Could you possibly fetch me a glass of water?"

"Of course. Right away."

Beauchamps was only too happy to oblige Reg's lovely sister, despite the fact that he became rather lost in this strange kitchen. He managed to half-fill a teacup with tap water, carefully carrying same to the girl. She thanked him as she drank, then attempted to stand.

"Sorry. I've never fainted before. I feel so stupid ... "

"Nonsense!" The man took her arm to steady her. Without meaning to, she looked up. There followed a rather awkward moment, as she looked again at his much-loved face with such adoration.

The spell was broken when Reggie's key was heard in the lock. The door swung open as the householder stepped over the threshold. Trying hard to master his emotions, Arthur turned around, to greet Reg with a friendly smile.

"Ah, Beau. You found me. Wonderful!"

The men shook hands warmly.

"This is m'sister, Anne. And Anne ... meet Arthur Beauchamps. Better give you your correct title, Old Boy. *Captain* Arthur Beauchamps, Anne."

"No, don't bother to salute me. Anne let me in. I hope I've not come at an awkward time for you, Reggie?"

"Not at all. Get you a drink. Do you want a sherry, Anne?"

Anne had had enough. It was too much, meeting Elwyd again like this, and not being able to hold him in her arms. She felt that her heart had been ripped from her chest.

"Reg ... Captain ... if you don't mind, I'll go to bed. I'm feeling rather tired. It was grand to meet you, Captain Beauchamps. I'm sorry I was so much trouble for you."

"Not at all, Anne. Marvellous. Er ... Hope you feel better."

Anne drifted off just as Reg handed him a glass of beer.

Reg nodded after Anne. "What was that you said?"

"Oh, your sister fainted. But don't fret. I think that she's quite alright now."

"Fainted?", Reg exploded. "Couldn't have. Why, she's never keeled over before. Was she squiffy?"

Arthur shrugged, then sipped his beer. "I shouldn't be drinking any more, either. I've had a skinful tonight."

Then followed something of a silence. Both men had memories to consider. It was Arthur who spoke first.

"I think Anne has me confused with someone else. Did her fiancé or her boyfriend not return from the War?"

"Lord, no. Nothing like that."

"She called me 'Elwood', or some such thing."

Reg stared at his friend. He tried to think. Elwood? That name rang a bell. Suddenly, a look of barely suppressed horror spread over Reggie's face.

Reggie all but exploded. "I say, I hope you haven't told my sister that you're Daphne Beauchamps's brother?"

"Of course not! What do you take me for? Why, I hardly shared three words with Miss Thorrock. The last thing I'd ever mention to her is my sister." Arthur was not taking any of that.

"Yes, but she must *never* know that it's *your* sister who is engaged to Sainsbury. I mean, it's *absolutely imperative!*"

Captain Beauchamps put down his glass, looking very concerned. "Reggie ... what the Devil's this all about? Does your sister have a crush on, or a romantic attachment with, *Sainsbury*?" The thought was all too hideous to contemplate. "For heaven's sake!"

"No, no! It's the jewels which His Lordship has bought for Daphne. My sister would fairly *kill* for those blasted jewels."

"What are you talking about, Reggie? Am I going mad? What on *earth* is all this about?"

Reggie skulled the rest of his drink, then placed his hands firmly on the other man's shoulders.

"It's the most *unbelievable* tale, Beau. Swear to God ... you won't believe it! You have to cast all rational thought aside."

"What?"

"Come here, will you? I want you to see the cause of all my distress."

Reggie Thorrock, diving into his pocket for his keys, led his bewildered friend to the spare bedroom, unlocked and opened the door, then snapped on the electric light. Reg pointed grandly to the spare bed.

"There! Behold! The *cassus belli* or whatever you call it. *Hinc illi lacraemi*."

Slightly stunned, Arthur glanced quickly about the room. He felt extremely sober, now. "What am I supposed to be appalled by, then?"

"The **bed**, damn it!"

"The bed? Why ... what's wrong with it?"

Reggie was too overcome to speak. Eyes popping, he dragged in a large gulp of air and then sputtered. "My dear fellow ... this bed is the Devil's own couch. It's bewitched! Everyone who dares to sleep in it wakes up in a fearful funk, sweating and screaming. One chap even ran wild over the moors, babbling like a witless wreck, and then he shot himself the very next day."

"Lord! Then, why do **you** have possession of it, Reggie? How did you come by it?"

Reg Thorrock shrugged. "Simple purchase. Knew my cousin, Charles, was coming to live here (until he gets himself settled), and needed a place for him to sleep. And what do you think, Beau? From the very first night in it, he had hideous nightmares. No, not 'hideous' ... I mean, bit of a costume drama, really. Lured me to sleep in it, to test his theories. I almost jumped out of my skin from fright. Then Anne had a turn: against my wishes, let me tell you! Now, I must state here and now that Anne is a very sensible, prosaic sort of a girl. Really she is ... **normally**. But this wretched business has sent

her loopy. Without blenching, my besotted sister stated quite baldly to Charles and I that you and she had had a real, physical wedding night! Don't need to expand any further on that theme, I trust!"

Here, Arthur paled. His lips trembled. There was nothing he could say in answer to the charge.

"Exactly ... Well, someone or other gave Anne (in this dream) **your** sister's jewellery, as a handsel. At least, the originals."

Under Beauchamps's bemused gaze, Thorrock began to pace about. Then he stopped, arms akimbo. When he spoke, it was with great deliberation.

"She says that they are **hers**, the jewels. So help me! She's gone completely ga-ga ... swear to God!"

Finally, Beauchamps found speech. "But, I didn't touch your sister except to wipe a wet tea-towel over her forehead. I implore you, Reg ... That's all that happened. Honestly!"

Reg looked annoyed. "I don't mean **you** as gloriously decorated British soldier. I mean you, **Elwyd**."

Beauchamps was saved from this complete insanity by the scroop of a key in the lock of the front door. Tired and dirty, Charles entered his cousin's house, lugging his heavy tool bag, and chucking it in an out-of-the-way place.

Reg's face brightened. "Ah, that'll be Charles. **He'll** tell you all about it." Reg quickly locked the spare room, then marched off to greet his cousin, with the captain trailing in his wake.

Charles began to tell his cousin about the difficult day he had had, when the visitor came into view. Charles stopped as if shot. Beauchamps, hands in pockets, gave a weak smile to the stranger.

It was just as Reg began the introductions (for he was tickled-pink that Charles and his Army chum could finally meet), when Charles stepped forward, with arms outstretched.

"Elwyd!" shouted Charles, his face wreathed in warm smiles. *"Broþor ond freond ... Nealles þæt an scurum heardne ac eac swelce god is his gear."*

[Brother and friend ... Not only battle-hardened, but also his spear is good.]

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END OF CHAPTER VIII

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER IX

"It's just too thick, that's what it is!" Reg exclaimed. "Fancy imagining that The Honourable Arthur Beauchamps DSO might be one of your mouldy people in this bally dream of yours."

Charles was instantly up in arms. "Hi! It's your dream as well ... Hoggard, and his recorder and --"

"But he *is*, Reg," Anne pleaded. "Both Charles and I recognized him as my husband, Elwyd. He traipsed off with you and Charles (whose real name is Rainard) on the fargang."

"The *what*?"

Anne was insistent, holding onto the front of Reg's cardigan. "That's why I passed-out when he knocked on your door tonight."

"You knew me as your brother, Rainard. You told me that. I was belting past you, on horseback." Charles quickly added, as a clincher. Reg looked from one to the other, bewildered and tongue-tied.

Charles then added his mite, in a more reasonable tone. "Reg, I realize that you locked that bedroom up tight, and that you didn't want anyone to sleep on that bed again."

"Well, I did, and I don't!" Blustering always worked for Reg, when cornered as he was.

"I'm sorry to have to admit this, but Anne and I have tried again and again to discover what happens in the course of this gripping tale."

Anne gently laid a hand on her brother's sleeve. "And we're not getting anywhere ..."

Pulling himself away from his sister's pleading eyes, and his cousin's challenging ones, Reg stomped about in the kitchen, pretending that there existed an urgent requirement to rearrange the fruit bowl and tidy up the newspapers.

Taking a big breath, he rounded on his two companions. "Let me understand this. Even though that ruddy bed is safely under lock and key, you two have still managed to have these wretched dreams?"

Anne nodded. "We just keep having the same ones over and over again, which is --"

As the girl spoke wistfully, Charles chimed in: "But to do it, we had to break into the room through the window."

Reg Thorrock stared at his two relatives, the very epitome of outraged horror. "What!? You two must be *mad*! What ... you climbed through the window, did you? In the dead of night?"

Charles strode quickly forward, confronting his cousin. "No, no ... Anne hit upon the notion of getting into the accursed bed *after* nighttime, just as the sun is rising on the horizon, that is."

"That way, instead of seeing just a jumble of mixed-up scenes, we could actually obtain a fluid narrative (or part thereof), with a beginning, a middle and --"

"Except that Anne and I have now apparently exhausted our share of the adventure. Anne repeatedly sees one chapter, and then I see another ... "

Reg was gob-smacked.

"So, dear Bro, it's all very wonderful, but Charles and I wish that we could ... you know, find out about the subsequent bits ..." Anne's voice drifted off. There was silence in the Thorrock kitchen but for the persistent ticking of a clock.

Charles looked at Anne, then shrugged his shoulders. "We'd really like to know how it all ends up."

"But sneaking in and out of windows? Why in blazes didn't you just come to me, openly, and demand the key?"

"You were so set against it, Reggie," Anne simply stated.

"Well ... not *that* set, after all. Goodness me! If you want to kip in that bally room, then you have my express permission to do so, come what may. And don't either of you blame me if "come-what-may" is not what you wanted it to be." Reg gave a brief, express nod. The argument was over.

"Reg," began Charles. "Would you mind awfully if I ask a friend of mine over to try it? We really believe that she's also a player in --"

"*She?*"

"Yes. Do you recall my speaking of a lovely girl on a disreputable pony, blocking my way? I found her."

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Watching Anne making the horror-bed with crisp, clean sheets, the Thorrock men spoke to each other from either side of the bed. Reg frowned deeply.

"-- Yes, but there's every chance that this filly of yours will suffer those ghastly nightmare thingummies of which Rowntree spoke. Did you think of that? Are you willing to risk that?"

Charles, hands deep in pockets, shrugged. "She's prepared to take that risk."

Anne piped up: "Only to please you!"

"I admit that I have a certain charm in that quarter which --"

Anne humphed as she straighted-up: "I'd still rather try Captain Beauchamps. Prove to him that I'm not off my head."

Reg instantly quashed that thought. "He doesn't want another thing to do with us after Chas's ridiculous outburst. Couldn't get away quickly enough. Poor chap!"

Charles merely laughed. "I'll never forget the look on his face! He must have thought me a lunatic, blurting out a Jutish welcome in that way. But seriously, that aside, my Joan is all we have. Let's be positive and give her a try."

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Miss Symington, however, proved an abject failure.

Shy and taciturn, the girl was coaxed and prodded into the fateful bedroom just as the first weak rays of sunlight appeared in the East. She lay on her back, staring up at the ceiling, with hands folded neatly over her stomach. ("Like a bally nun awaiting communion, she was!" Reg was to bellow at a

later date.) Slowly, the eyelids closed, and the Thorrock clan stood about, breathlessly awaiting the outcome. It was all nervous suspense.

However, some minutes later, Miss Symington arose from the bed, thanked Anne for a lovely night, and asked to be taken home.

"Anything?" Charles was questioned, following his return from dropping his fiancée off at the train station.

"Nothing," Charles uttered, gloomily, prior to slumping into a chair. "Nothing at all ..."

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During the following week or two, Anne and Charles worked on Reg.

"So, we've failed with your Joan, Charles, and Captain Beauchamps is so fed-up with us that he's giving us a very wide berth --"

"And who on Earth can blame him?" Reg snorted.

"I was thinking ... What about MSB? You remember, the ditzy blonde we found out of petrol by the roadside on our way to visit Mother?"

Reg laughed heartily at that one. "No, that won't wash. She's not in it, not by a long chalk."

Anne appeared to concentrate deeply. "Then ... there is only **one** other to whom we may turn."

Anne looked speakingly at her cousin, who quickly cottoned-on. "Right! Just one other. Without him, we're stuck in Purgatory."

When Reg, who'd been idling away over a crossword looked up, to see the cousins looking straight at him (so angelic were their faces!), he leaned back in his chair.

"You mean *me*, of course."

Neither Anne nor Charles expected even a modicum of acquiescence. Yet, Reg was always full of surprises.

"Very well," he sighed, resigned to his fate. "Name my poison."

Charles gave some sound advice: "Wake yourself up just before sunrise. The times of sunrise, sunset and the tides are -- " here, Charles waved vaguely in the direction of a folded newspaper. "At any road, just before sunrise, go into the bedroom and ... Make sure that you have a good, square meal tonight, as you won't wake up for hours."

Reg nodded, solemnly. "You two ... so insistent. Makes me feel uneasy." Nervously, Reg hitched his finger around the inside of his shirt collar. "Lord! You know, Charles, this is one of the worst capers I've ever been involved in. And I've masterminded many of my own. Bloody ridiculous!"

Charles and Anne grinned at Reg's discomfiture. "Chin up, Old Man. You'll want to meet Hoggard again, surely? Brave hearts adventuring ..."

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It was neither a brave Reg nor a poltroon who stumbled along to the horror-bed in the gathering light of Sunday morning. Mr Thorrock was in a filthy mood as he tossed himself onto the sheet on which Miss Joan Symington had reclined not so many days ago. "This is a load of codswallop. Absolute rubbish. Ought to have my head examined. They're both balmy. Balmy to their bootstraps!"

The first real slivvers of pale light appeared around the silhouettes of the roses which grew on the other side of the window. Hoggard had managed to haul his large frame up onto the back of the draughthorse, and was fairly itching to start tootling on his wooden recorder. But it just did not seem to be the appropriate time for a merry tune, as his mount clomped into the long grass.

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Throughout Sunday, Anne awaited her brother's awakening. She balked at luncheon, preferring to nibble an apple as she leaned against the architrave of the doorway to the spare room. Charles wandered about all day, rather lost. He decided to give his set of tools a working-over with oil, a wire brush and a dirty rag. However, Anne's edginess and constant commentary were more than a man could stand. With the old cylinder mower, Charles tidied up the front lawn. During the time it took polishing-off a long-necked bottle of stout (which he drank in the privacy of the dimly-lit garden shed), he mowed and raked the lawn. A bit of polite weeding followed that. Finally, with the setting of the sun, Charles strolled back into the small kitchen. As he had expected, Anne immediately regaled him with the news that there was no news.

Charles sighed. "He'll wake up when he wakes up. You can't rush it."

After several false starts and dashed hopes, Anne finally conceded that she and Charles should at least *try* to eat a decent supper. Although Charles made many attempts to engage his cousin in a civilized conversation over the course of their repast, the girl remained *distracte*, dreamy. Charles gave it up. When the dishes were stowed away, and Anne had readied herself for bed, he patted her shoulder and gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek. Anne's eyes filled with unshed tears. Her attempt at "Goodnight" was weak.

Somewhat sadly, Charles lowered his frame into a kitchen chair, returning to the overhaul of his tool set. Whistling softly as he worked, he imagined that Anne would by now be crying herself to sleep. Such a pity! They had been such a happy team, the three of them. Such a happy team ...

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Sitting in the kitchen chair, drifting off to sleep under the glare of the stark electric globe, Charles awoke suddenly. The clock, ticking loudly on the top of the tallboy, signalled that the time wanted but five minutes to midnight.

"Cup of tea, Old Chap?" asked Reg, who leaned at his ease against the kitchen sink.

Charles stretched, knuckling his eyes. "Christ! I have to get out of bed in just on 5 hours, and haven't even hit the hay yet."

"Perhaps you'd prefer something soporific? Cocoa, then?"

"No. Tea will be --"

Charles suddenly realized that Reg was awake. "Hi! What happened? Did you --"

"Yes, I did!" Reg was smug. "As a matter of fact, yes! And Charles, Old Boy, I don't much like your Joan Symington as a candidate for Reece. That's the name of your derring-do maiden, you know ... Reece. Can understand about you're having fallen for her. Just your type. At any road, they may look vaguely similar (Joan and Reece), but no connection, I'm afraid. Sorry to say this about your lady love: too lily-white by half. Your Reece was a fiery maiden. As I said, I can completely understand why you fell for her. Quite understandable! But Joan? No!"

Sadly, Charles nodded, staring unseeing at the tabletop. "Yes ... I'm beginning to think so, too. I'll have to let her down gently, then try again."

Anne caterpaulted herself into the kitchen. Eyes blazing, and hair askew, she had done no more than drag her dressing-gown sketchily over her nightie.

"Reg!" Anne was breathless. She could hardly contain her excitement. "Reg! Elwyd? Oh, please tell me!"

Reg smirked. "Elwyd?"

Anne fairly throbbed with anticipation. "Dearest Brother, do you agree now that he and Captain Beauchamps are one and the same? Granted?"

"Granted," agreed her brother without emotion. "Oh, yes. Your husband is Arthur. Can't get around it. No possible doubt. There, I've said it."

Both men watched for Anne's reaction. They were not to be disappointed. For a few seconds, the girl stared at the men, as if seeking divine inspiration. Then, with a ragged gasp, the girl began weeping. With a murmured excuse, hands over her face, she fled back to her bedroom.

Both men glanced at each other, grinning. Charles shifted in his chair. "Whereabouts, timewise, did you get to in the story, Reg?"

"I rather think that I've picked up where you left off, Cuz. We're all busy fighting for the honour and safe return of Queen Netta-Vere. Hoggard seems to have been given the official role of bodyguard there."

Charles looked up at Reg's face to catch a glimpse of something ethereal flitting across his visage. "What is it? You know who she is, don't you? This Jutish Queen? So ... the boys in the fargang have caught up with her at last. And Cempa?"

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"Am I **really** a beauteous Anglo-Saxon queen? **Really?**"

"Truth of the matter is that you're the most lovely, and the best loved of all the Saxon queens."

"But ... you told me earlier on that I wasn't even *in* your jaunt!"

"Made a mistake, that's all. No, you're in it alright. Main character, truth be told ..."

On a sunny Friday afternoon, at the Golf Club, Reg Thorrock was entertaining Miss Mignonette Steers-Barclay. For once, Reg wore correct attire, even down to a silk cravat in the club colours. Miss Steers-Barclay was a vision, as always. Whether or not she knew that every eye was on her was undecided. She chatted gaily with Reg, who now seemed delighted in her company. Chatted on about how thrilling it was to be a queen, and asking copious questions on the subject of Her Majesty's raiment.

Then, when he was able to slot a word or two into the conversation, Reg gave a bald, unembroidered account of their journey back in time. His auditrix was enthralled, fascinated. Reg told the girl all about the many perils surrounding the Queen. He spoke of her beauty, and expanded greatly on the love which her people had for her. He even touched on his own duties in protecting her. And it was this possibility of a wonderful romance which captivated the volatile beauty. Even more captivating was the notion that she might also be able to travel back in time.

"Too divine, Reggie darling! What must I do?"

"Well, here's how it will work. You'll lie in my real bed, and I'll sit in a cane chair. I can sleep there well enough. Then, at dawn, I'll wake myself, and I'll carry you to the devil-bed. And I'll lay you down on it. That's it."

Mignonette gasped, then uttered a wicked giggle. "Mr Thorrock, this all sounds terribly lovely, yet naughty."

Irritated, Reg snapped: "But it's not! If anything, it would be scientific experiment. Call it research. And you must tell us all about any visions you might have in your sleep."

"Visions? Are you going to hypnotize me, then? What fun!"

"Listen here, young lady; I want you to understand absolutely that I have no designs upon your virtue. Your mother and father need have no worries about your sojourn at 23 Danube Square. I want to assure you of that."

Rather than looking relieved, the young lady pouted deliciously, using her eyes to great effect. Reg shook his head, but seemed to be more than ever enchanted by his vivacious companion.

"Let's get this out of the way first, little woman ... and then we'll see ..."

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Duly, the eager girl came to stay at Danube Square.

Anne and Mignonette spent seemingly ages chatting away together, leaving Charles and Reg to find their own entertainment. There were frocks to look at, jewellery to hold up to the light, photographs, letters, ribbons, trinkets, shoes and handbags: the ladies maintained a constant ripple of thrilling discussion and giggled whispers. Charles was amused. He was utterly glad that Anne appeared to be coming back to herself. The whole episode of female twittering rather annoyed Reg, however. It was probably because he was nervous for his little friend. All he wished for was bed-time. The morning would reveal all. But the morning would never come while they all hung about smoking and laughing.

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After what seemed an eternity, Reg carefully bore the girl into the coolness of the room where the haunted bed stood. She weighed nothing. Reg carried her as if she were a precious piece of china. On placing her carefully onto the prepared bed, the young man managed to kiss the sleeping beauty on her lips and on her hair. He was tired to death; fear for his love added weight to his fatigue. So, wearing a harrowed demeanour, Reg stumped into the kitchen, flopping his body heavily into the nearest chair. Silently, Charles pushed a beerglass and opened beer bottle towards his cousin. Reg, likewise silent, raised his eyebrows, quickly pouring a glass of beer and downing same. Finally, Reg let out a shuddering sigh. Absently, he reached over for an old newspaper and pretended to flick through the pages. It was dawn. Either way one looked at the situation, the two young men were drinking beer too early, or too late.

Charles spoke, matter-of-factly: "Arthur Beauchamps is needed here. I could kick myself for frightening him off as I did. Bloody stupid of me, actually." Reg thought of a fitting reply (that Anne, too, had played her part in that quarter) but did not bother with it.

Charles drank another glass of beer, closely watching his cousin, who turned the pages of the newspaper with something akin to moodiness. Pursing his lips, Charles stood up, and wandered over to the sink, to rinse out his glass. Lazily, he leaned against the draining board, arms folded.

Charles spoke, as if recalling a favourite memory. "Wilt rides the pony, and Haewan, Shelf and Elwyd lead the dogs. Derrie rides the roan, Hoggard scores the draughthorse, and the grey gelding is mine. We'll find some hack work for food and shelter. There'll be folk-clutches on the way. But the fear is that Brach will lose Cempa's scent. We'll deal with that as we get to it."

Reg violently closed the newspaper: "And we'll all put our hands into the middle, swear allegiance to the fargang and the tale is duly told."

Having said that, Reg Thorrock looked hugely uncomfortable. Perturbed, he raked his hair with his fingers. He had to say something: "Why are we guzzling beer at this hour of the day?"

Charles grinned. "Tongue-loosener," was his simple reply.

Reg nodded, gulped down another frothing glass of ale, then slaked the back of his hand over his lips.

"Yes, it was a lovely Summer's day, and our progress was good. The countryside was more than charming. I'd forgotten how very lovely England must have been. The vale was filled with tall, green trees: ash, oak, lilac. And the folk-clutch (when we reached it) was as dainty as you could possibly imagine."

END OF CHAPTER IX

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER X

The crowd of rowdy Saxons in the Mead Hall at Harroyd demanded to hear the wonderlings tell their tales. For the Jutes (of all the Germanic people inhabiting the British Isles at that time) could still regale a restless gathering with yarns about the old times on the Continent, and stories of the "Roe-men" who had preceded them. The Jutish stories drifted back over time, to the lands long-forgotten by the Angles and Saxons. Many a tear was shed by strong, lusty men as Derrie held the floor, calling on men's imaginations in sonorous voice. So pleased were the Saxons with Derrie's oration, that they brought out the Symbol drinking horns to solemnly honour the occasion. For some few minutes, the business of passing the finely-decorated mead-horns from man to man engrossed everybody's interest.

Then the mood became cheery, as the wonderlings earned their supper.

The Chief banged the boards following Wilt's ballad (sung to the accompaniment of Hoggard's talented recorder playing and Elwyd's deep humming), and other men joined the Chief in this "applause". Haewan found some implements to bang together in time to Shelf's whistling. This allowed Rainard to perform a spirited dance. He had expected other young men to join him as he skipped and jumped about. However, it was a bevy of older married women and a couple of girls who tried to mimic Rainard's steps. The audience clapped and joined the rollicking and whistling. It proved to be a wonderful night: for Saxon, for wonderling.

This Mead Hall, in truth, was well-presented and extremely functional. In the middle of the floor, under a gap in the roof, stood a large fire, built in a large "pen" made of rocks. The dogs and children were focused on the fireside, along with the obligatory slaves. They all squabbled over the food scraps chucked vaguely in the direction of the large fireplace. On four sides of this fire (and a goodly distance from it) stood four boards, each supported by stout tree stumps. The folk sat on stools, facing the fire. This cosy arrangement allowed everyone to see everything that might be going on. Some of the slave women uncovered their breasts to suckle young. Indeed, the female slaves were either with child or suckling children (their own or Saxon babies). The children seemed healthy and happy, so this arrangement appeared quite providential. Of older slaves, there was no sign. They had probably been consigned to the earth, as being past their usefulness. Or perhaps sacrificed to appease the gods ...

And the food! The wonderlings could do ought but stare at the constant laying of plates or bowls of hearty food, which was quickly snatched by the men and women, predominately in the fingers. Many times did the Chieftain quaff ale from one of the silver-trimmed horns, praising the feast-hall, honouring the feast-joy. Then he would proceed to rip blood-dripping meat from the bone with his strong teeth. Squab cooked over the flame, lumps of yellow butter, loaves of dark rye bread, slices of dried meat, sticky potage, flavoursome yams, wedges of cheese, dried fruits, herb-stuffed fish ... There was no excuse for an empty stomach at Harroyd Mead Hall on that night.

So very pleased was the Chief of the Harroyd Saxons, that he questioned the wonderlings closely on the nature of their fargang. They told of Cempa, of his wild escape, of the news that naught has so far been heard of him. Nodding, the Chief whispered to his wife, that she should bring five women to talk to the wanderers. Shelf and Derrie exchanged a speaking look. Yet, these women were wives, two of them heavily pregnant.

"Tell these wonderlings what you heard in the Near Treeland," commanded the Chief. Without hesitation, the eldest of the women spoke.

"We were gathering wood in the Treeland when we came upon a party of women from the Near Treeland folk, likewise gathering of the wood. They wanted to swap their cakes and lardy scones with us."

Here, a group of men laughed heartily. "Trust you lot to be scoffing sweets in the woods."

"Oh, their baked goods were not nearly as good as ours, but still nice. It was while we sat around with these women that we heard of Queen Netta-Vere. She's gone. Snatched from her bed as she slept. The only clue is that a young man on a black or dark grey stallion was seen thereabouts."

"He had been asking about the Queen ... wanting to know where she could be found," chimed-in another woman.

"But more important, he left a small runestone with one of these Near Treeland women, saying that wonderlings would follow him." This old girl nodded as if in support of her words.

Rainard leaned forward. "So, this woman has a pledge from Cempa which is to be passed onto us. Is that right?"

There followed much agreement. The women, with their moment of importance fast waning, were bent on making the most of this focus. They chewed-over the various points of the narrative. However, the wonderlings had heard enough.

The 6 men agreed, as they walked with Wilt and the dogs to the Cock Barn, that their best option now was to collect the rune stone from the Near Treeland folk early next morning.

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"God, we were drunk!" exclaimed Reg, grinning boyishly as he shook his head. "All I wanted to do was sleep. They put us in the Cock Barn ... we'd know such a barrack as the Single Men's Quarters, I

suppose. Keeping company with the horses. Just a heap of straw for a bed and provide your own blankets. At least it was Summertime.

"Our damned brother-in-law Elwyd wanted to unburden himself of his lustful thoughts. Wanted to tell us about his love for our sister, Fynne. How much he yearned for her and how wonderful it was to lie next to her naked body. Silly clunch! I mean, who really wants to hear that guff about one's sister! I threw a bit of wood at him, but that only made him more lovelorn. My notion was that the sight of all those naked titties had set him off. But you know, Chas, you and I seemed to just take it in our stride, that mess of writhing humanity in the Mead Hall at Harroyd."

"So ... is that it?" asked a somewhat disappointed Charles.

"Oh, no. Much more followed that. Next morning, we wandered over to these other folk, who went by the name of the Near Treeland folk. The runestone was handed over with much stiff-backed ceremony. I'm positive that not one man cracked a smile during that entire interlude. There was beer made of honey (foul stuff!) which was gulped down from cups made out of bullock's horns. And none of this sipping a Pimm, Chas! Each man was expected to take a sizeable glug of the stuff and then solemnly pass the Symbol horn to the next chap, until the horn got back to the chief. At that juncture, Derrie duly pocketed the stone. The Treeland lads put us on the right course to follow Cempa and the kidnapped Queen, and off we trudged. Oh yes! And they forced us to take along with us their mad magician. Chap called Murdo. He's the stinker I ran into at the local shop ... told you about his hang-dog, woebegone predictions ... At any road, this Murdo chap and Derrie instantly hit it off."

"But I don't understand. Surely these tree people would have sent off a posse of their own to chase Cempa, to rescue their Queen. What were they thinking? That you lot would providentially turn up?"

Reg stood, shaking his head. "No. Apparently, Cempa assured the tribe that the Queen was needed by Seaxneat, that he (that is, Cempa) alone must bear her off, and that a group of Federation men would follow for further support."

"And these people *accepted* that?"

"What choice did they have? Cempa swore an oath that the mightiest god of all had taken him aside to instruct him. That oath did the trick. They let their Queen depart without even a tirewoman or wench to assist her. And accompanied by a lusty young stranger, to boot! Strange goings-on for those days, it seems ... At any rate, things become a great deal more involved the further North we wonderlings go. Look here, I'd better go and check on my own Netta-Vere. Won't be a tick."

Charles strolled out of the house into the back yard, which was now fairly throbbing with birds and busy insects. It was a smashing morning! The very air suggested that this cloudless sky held the promise of a glorious day. Perhaps he and Reg could hunker down to mull over the vagaries of the wonderlings ...

After a time, Thorrock made his way back to the kitchen. Reg was still absent. He (Reg) was found to be sitting on the devil bed, looking with mooncalf eyes at his sleeping lady, as he gently stroked her arms. Charles cleared his throat, causing his rather shame-faced cousin to look around, quickly. Charles gestured with a flick of his head, and Reg took the hint. Soon, both men were sitting out in the garden.

"Cock Barn for you, old man," laughed Charles.

"But what is it about girls -- pretty girls -- that makes one go like this?"

"Biology. They're made to be pretty so that we'll do the one thing that Nature intended for us chaps to do." Charles looked about him, with the demeanour of one who knows Earth's darker secrets.

"Well, she's bothering me."

"Good! Show's you're human, after all, Reg. Look, the solution's simple ... marry her and then you can let your feelings run riot."

"Agh! I don't intend to wind up as a love-sick nincompoop like Arthur ... I mean, Elwyd, of course."

Both men relaxed in the garden chairs. Everything on that day was perfect. Even the flowers (such as they were) seemed to have put on their brightest show.

Charles slapped his knee decidedly. "Tell you what, Cuz. You finish telling me about the fargang, and I'll cook breakfast for us both. Then we'll plan our day."

"Where was I up to?"

"Elwyd was making you gag while you were trying to sleep."

"No ... I'd got further along than that ..."

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"This is where I became incapacitated. And Elwyd for that matter. You see, the further north we journeyed, the less welcome we became. Here in the South we were received with cakes, buns and mead ale: with beck and nod, so to speak. Happiness all around. It was all real old-fashioned hospitality. Then, up North, the mood changed to closed doors and aggressive shouts. The harder the countryside became, the more forbidding became both the outlook and the people. It was damned noticeable. And not a little discomfoting, let me tell you.

"Derrie had the rune stone, and Haewan had the pledges. Didn't matter ... we were seen as vile trespassers and warned off. Finally, we found a hollow, constructed for ourselves a hut of branches, bark and leaves ... The tale had to be told of course (as is our way) ... but that goes without saying. We then snuggled up for the night. Summer it might have been, but the nights were still bloody cold."

"That must have been fun to snuggle up to Shelf!" Charles chuckled.

"Yes, very funny. Of course, the dogs piled themselves on top of us, which made matters even worse. Cuz, have you ever been trapped in a tiny compartment with a farting canine? Absolutely horrible! At any road, I woke in the morning to find that some large, smelly blighter was setting upon me. I could hear the other chaps trying to maintain possession of the horses. But what with the uncontrolled barking of the dogs ... What's the word? Cacophony? We found out later from Reece that these rogues were called Gravel Folk."

This was of especial interest to Charles. "How did you meet up with Reece?"

"Oh, your Reece sat on the bare back of a hairy pony, one leg crossed over the other knee; right there in the hollow where we'd camped. She seemed to be pert and cheeky, as she watched the wonderlings trying to restore order. 'The Gravel folk are rough and care-for-nobody,' she told us. But there was laughter and mockery in her voice, all the same. Strange kind of dialect she had ... You and Shelf took off at speed, with Reece beside you."

Reg sighed. Charles frowned. "So ... why the urgency? Had we found Cempa?"

"God no! No, it was much worse than you could imagine. These Gravel folk had taken exception to Derrie's arguments that we had free passage, owing to our pledges and what-not. So they abducted him. Derrie was taken as a prisoner, would you believe, and thus liable for sacrifice to Thor. "

Charles was appalled. "Oh, shit!"

"I woke up at that point. I had left the wonderlings being comforted by this Murdo fellow, with Derrie, you and Reece gone; Elwyd and I in excruciating pain."

The two men watched a couple of sparrows squabbling.

"That's why I was so very keen for Nettie to give that bed a whirl, Chas. I really am desperate to find out if poor Derrie survived the abduction."

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Given their situation, it was extremely odd that Reg, Charles and Anne were able to loll about in Reg's garden, soaking in the beauty of the long Summer day. It was not often that a Sunday should prove so utterly magic. All unexpected, the vicar of Reg's parish, Reverend Cartwright, called on the trio, and amused them during their afternoon, taking tea with them. Miss Mignonette Steers-Barclay slept on (thank heaven!) during the visit. The interlude certainly took their minds off Derrie's plight, which was a blessing in disguise. By the time the vicar had taken his leave, the members of the Thorrock family were feeling very pleased with themselves. Anne accompanied Reg into the room where Nettie slept on, watching in awe as Reg (now impatient with holding back his emotions) stroked and kissed his little love. Nothing Thorrock did would disturb his lady. And so the long day drifted into a long, silver evening. It was not until well after 10 o'clock that night that Mignonette finally awoke.

The lovely girl, eyes still clouded with sleep, stalked into the kitchen, sitting without ceremony on Reg's knee and snuggling into his warm body, with a thankful sigh. The young man wrapped the girl in his arms, kissing her cheeks and hair lovingly.

"I want to tell you --," the lady began.

"Best leave it for now, little love, for I must dive into bed. Work tomorrow." Reg sternly decided that **he** would have the sofa such that Miss Steers-Barclay should occupy his own bed.

"I'm not tired. Shan't sleep."

"You may like to read, then, Darling. Anne has left a barrowload of sick-making novels lying about the house. You couldn't do better than curl up in my room with a pile of these romance books. Soak up the passion. While-away the hours until you nod off to sleep."

"But, Dearest Reggie, I've been sleeping forever. I want to tell you!"

They kissed with tremendous affection and warmth. After what seemed an age, Reg finally allowed himself to draw back. Nettie, on the other hand, snuggled into the man's neck.

"You need a shave," she giggled.

"Probably ... Look, there is one thing I want to know and then I'll troop off to the Land of Nod."

"Yes?"

Reg gulped. "Don't spare me, now. Did Derrie buy it?"

He was rewarded with a trill of merriment. "Oh, no. Cempa rescued him from the ghastly sods who'd seized him so violently."

Reg was aghast. "*Cempa?*"

"Gosh, yes. That's what I want to --"

Reg eased the girl from his knee, so that he could stand. "Tomorrow. I'll hear it all tomorrow. You see, Charles and Anne will want to be in on it, too."

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Anne whisked the dishes off the kitchen table, to plonk them unceremoniously into the sink. The Thorrocks and their divine guest had decided that the kitchen was the place for big revelations. Hence, they had eaten their supper in the full light of day at the kitchen table. And, once the table was cleared, Miss Steers-Barclay stretched, then looked about at her audience.

"You start, Reggie-dear."

"Erm ... Well, in the parlance of the Wild West, we were "jumped" by outlaws who roughed us up and tried to steal the horses. Reece, who of course is Charlie's wonder-maiden, was a local with considerable derring-do. For a girl, that is. With Elwyd and I bunged-up, Rainard, Shelf and this Reece-girl dashed off, dogs at heel, bent on rescuing Derrie. The fear and horror was that as a prisoner, Derrie would become a human sacrifice, as was the custom of the Saxons."

Anne blanched. "This all sounds so grizzly. Not by any means the merriment which I saw at my marriage."

"Don't be squeamish, Anne. It was a lovely toot. I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

Charles lightly tapped his palms on the tabletop. "Alright, then. Let's make a start." He looked intently at Reg's girlfriend. She made sure that everyone had something to drink. The men were satisfied with beer, whereas Anne had dug out an old bottle, half-filled with sweet sherry for the girls to share.

"I was skipping and dancing about in a sweet little glade. I'm sure that fairies, elves and sprites lived there, within the copse of baby maples. So, assuming that I was in the midst of the little people, I sang a lilting, sweet song to charm them."

Reg dropped his head into his hands. "Why, oh, why am I not surprised?"

The lady kindly patted Reg's arm. "At least I was wonderfully happy there, dancing about. But silly Cempa dragged me off, making me climb an enormous tree, and hide up in the heights, keeping as silent as the grave."

Anne leaned forward, asking thrillingly: "What was Cempa like?"

Mignonette was not impressed. She pouted deliciously. "Just a big, bossy boy who thought that his superior strength and deep voice gave him the right to order me about."

Anne gave Reg and Charles a speaking look. "So has it always been!"

Charles raised an eyebrow in surprise. whereas Reg, in Cempa-like fashion, insisted that Nettie get on with the story.

"Cempa, on Hildoffa's magnificent black horse, cantered off, with the horse's long, silken tail streaming out behind him ..."

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END OF CHAPTER X

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER XI

Hearts beating in terror for their friend, the wonderlings (Rainard, Shelf and the cheeky girl on her wild-looking pony) never managed to catch up with the Gravel people. For the transgressors had stolen a march on our heroes, quickly despatching their victim without ceremony, only tapping-off enough sacrificial blood for later use, and leaving the mangled carcass for the birds to peck.

Rainard, tears streaming down his face, shouted that he could see Derrie's corpse; that the scoundrels had summarily killed him, and that the wonderlings must collect his remains for proper burial. However, the dogs did not behave as expected; they showed scant interest in the grotesquely-posed body. Closer inspection proved that the murdered man was *not* Derrie after all. The men looked at each other, puzzled and perturbed. "Then where is Derrie?" asked Shelf.

Behind them, the desperate sound of a large horse's hooves caused the small party to brace themselves, arms at the ready. The black stallion came into view, bearing both Cempa and Derrie on his broad back. Leaping into action, Shelf tried to haul Cempa from his mount, in order to knife the culprit to death. Cempa, waving urgently at Shelf, shouted to him that he must hear him out.

"Shelf, Shelf! Do not kill me, as I was bidden by Seaxneat to collect Queen Netta-Vere and take her to Blen a'Moor. I had no choice in the matter. Were I to refuse, it would be more than my life was worth. That was the meaning of the rune stone, left for you all."

"Seaxneat? He spoke to you?" Shelf had calmed considerably. Meanwhile, Derrie dismounted, hugging his rescuers with great fondness. This especially applied to Reece, whom he had not previously seen. Derrie had always had an eye for a pretty face!

"Where is she then, this beauteous queen of the Near Treeland?" Rainard did not like the sound of all this. It was all too even, this tale.

Rather than answer the question, Cempa slumped his head forward, shaking it sadly. "Does anyone else want to take over the minding of this troublesome wench? A queen she might be, but ... what a very handful is this lady!"

"Where is she?" This between gritted teeth.

"Up in a tree, actually. Long may she stay there." Cempa certainly looked miserable.

"What is this that you say, Cempa?"

Cempa had become thoroughly fed-up with his female charge. Besides, he argued vehemently, he had known in his vitals that Derrie was in danger. That was a wonderous part of Cempa's make-up: this ability to empathize with his closest and dearest. And so, he had left the girl hidden as best he could, then dashed off to deal with Derrie's attackers.

Derrie fairly gushed. "He leapt down from a high tree branch, did Cempa, taking out the two men who had me bound and gagged. I thought I was a goner, truly I did. Then, lo! Here is my old boyhood friend, my almost-brother Cempa! Whoosh! And the beasts who would have drunk my blood and used my guts for bowstrings, screamed and ran like the very cowards that they are. That dead chap

whom you no doubt took for myself was indeed one of their own party, who had erred in some nameless way, offending their scaly chieftain. These gruesome monsters made **him** their sacrifice. Was there ever such evil? Their own man! At all events, thanks be to you, Cempa; for your heroism, for your bravery. I do live to fight another day!"

It was typical of Derrie to be fulsome in his praise. Rainard just wanted to chastise Cempa for all the trouble he had caused. Shelf wanted to chuck in the fargang and return to his simple, uneventful little life. Cempa himself was too tired to care. Only Reece seemed to be conscious of the need to take action.

"Look, if you want, I'll make myself the carer of the Queen. If she is hiding in a tree, then perhaps our first thought should be to find this tree, then call her down."

The thought was good, but unnecessary. When the small party made their way to the glade, there in all her ethereal grace, danced the girl, so reminiscent of a fairy, or of a water sprite, that the men all gasped in wonder. On seeing the rescuers, she skipped over to the party, kissing cheeks and talking non-stop. The Queen dragged Reece into the dance, giving her a silken shawl to drape over her hips. The pair tripped lightly and gracefully among random patches of rustic greenery. Reece half-heartedly joined-in. The pair provided the men with the most beautiful sight that their tired eyes would ever enjoy.

"By my reckoning, now that we have Cempa, the black stallion and this girlie in our keeping, we can turn about and go home," commented Haewan. Shelf nodded in full agreement.

"Not so, Haewan. Not so. The gods meet on a moor. We are to go norther, until we are summoned," insisted Cempa.

"Surely we are not needed, all of us ... ", began Elwyd, frowning.

Murdo held up a hand, his face set.

"Attend! If Seaxneat made a covenant with this man here, this Cempa, then none -- no man, n'woman can gainsay that covenant. By Seaxneat, by your ancestor Kyran, you know this to be true. We **all** must go! The fargang continues as before. Swear to honour it. Put your hands into the ring!"

One by one, each man and Wilt, however reluctant he might be, entered the ring, stretching his right hand into the centre. Reece approached them, peeking through the "window" made by Rainard's bent arm. She then unthinkingly tried to enter the circle herself, to find that every man looked askance at her. "Woman! The men must tell the tale and **only** the men. Stand back, girl!" Murdo roared at her. Shamefaced, Reece quickly effaced herself, stepping back to join the Queen.

Murdo nodded as he cleared his throat. "We shall all continue to Blen a'Moor, for whatever awaits us there. That is the tale. The tale is duly told." The men all grunted their assent, hands locked together in the circle's centre. Then the men dispersed.

Murdo laughed, at ease now that the fargang had regained a united purpose. "I'm going to find me a shady nook to take my sleep. The rest of you should look to our combined comfort."

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As Murdo tramped off in one direction, Rainard, Derrie and Shelf wandered off with Reece into the depth of the thick, Northern forest. They were armed with short arrows, small yew bows (strung with squirrel-gut), spears, and a couple of net bags. The girl seemed very knowledgeable on the matter of forest lore. As would a native, she read the signs of animals left discretely in the woods: on bracken branches, or near stones on rocky pathways. Pointing and signalling in silence, the men followed Reece, marvelling at her astuteness, her acumen. They caught two hares, a wild suckling pig, four pigeons and three brace of blackbirds.

Wilt minded the dogs, as they would have disturbed the hunters, being ill-trained and boisterous. The horses needed grooming, too. So Wilt sang happily in the dappled sunshine as he tended to his

little group of horses and ponies. It was Wilt, keen to be helpful, who set and lit the fire which would later cook the feast. Wilt also ensured that there was plenty of water for beast and man.

Haewan chopped wood, built a shelter for the wonderlings, and generally amused himself whistling along with Wilt's melodic singing. Cempa sat about in solitude, honing or polishing the various swords, armour and shields which lay about in the clearing. And Queen Netta-Vere was in her element. She had dragooned the hapless Hoggard into accompanying her on an outing to gather herbs, flowers and greens. Reece might be a past master at wood-lore, but Nettie was a veritable mine of botanical facts.

"We call this 'minseed'", she laughed, using her little knife to gather valerian. "And these bilberries are an aid for the eyesight. And what do we call this?" At this juncture, the dainty Queen held two cuckoo-flowers up into a shaft of sunlight.

"I've always known them as 'hossett'," said Hoggard. "But it may be that the Saxons have another name for them. They're very pretty."

"Aye! And wisp, cowslip, clover and mint."

Hoggard pointed to the mint. "I use that for my poor stomach. Since Ma died, I don't get fed as good as before. Reckon that's why Rainard is often bad-tempered, if you think on it ..."

"You'll come and live with me such that I may feed you. I'll welcome you into my tribe. Then you may come to my bed so that we'll have many, many sons." Nettie delivered her statement with disarming certainty, then skipped off to gather roses, mistletoe, peonies and heartsease. Hoggard trailed along, pushing the various specimens into a rough bag.

"You shouldn't talk like that, Lass. About me and you bedding together. We have to be married first."

"No," stated Nettie, baldly. "I'm the Queen, so I make all the decisions. I could have many men, you know, but I've been careful up to now to have only women about me. That way, I have not been troubled by cock. However, this fargang has opened my eyes to new possibilities. I think that I should like to lie with a man, then suckle his child."

Hoggard strode up to the girl, roughly grasping her wrist. "You must not speak in this way, little woman, Queen or no. Frige insists on the wedding-bond that forbids a man and woman to lie together until they are truly spliced. Don't you remember the words? 'The womb holds the world, as it shall spill forth, for all men and women, that bonded are, one to the other.' I shall not hear you say stuff that rightly belongs in the Cock Barn."

The girl looked up coquettishly. "Kiss me once, Hoggard, and then I'll keep mum on my feelings." The Queen had expected a little chaste peck on the cheek from her gallant. Instead, the driven young man hauled her into his arms to deal with her in a way that satisfied him, and frightened her.

Recovering, Nettie pranced off, pretending a greater interest in the greenery than she really felt. Before long, she had inveigled Hoggard to kneel in the dirt, digging up worts and roots to add to her collection.

It was then that Hoggard saw the injured goose flapping about desperately, the hapless victim of a mistimed fox attack. Hoggard snatched-up the goose, swiftly snapping its neck in his strong hands. Without pause, the man had the dead fowl tied to his belt. The fox, hesitating in its frustrated quest for sustenance, slunk off nimbly from Hoggard's vicinity, his brush disappearing in the undergrowth. Hoggard beamed at the little Queen, and received another lovely kiss for good measure.

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As evening gathered in the West, the goodly feast was cooked on a large open fire. Another rough-hewn shelter was constructed, as before with branches, sticks, bark and willpower. But the problem

of female occupants stared the men in the face. How could eight men, a boy several dogs and two females cohabit with anything like decorum?

"Two separate huts, then?"

"No. We'll have two men standing guard. The two girls will sleep side-by-side, with two trusted men either side of them."

"Well, you can trust me to sleep next to the Queen, for I'll not touch her, be assured!" Cempa turned away, in order to kick a lump of clay.

Queen Netta-Vere looked cross. "Cempa, you only ever have nightmares when you sleep with the pins. Use your common sense and pin the pins elsewhere. In the trees or something ..."

"Pins?" For the very first time, Murdo was distracted from his mumblings and mutterings.

Cempa, sighing in an annoyed fashion, dived his hand down his chest, pulling forth a small bag hanging from his neck. From it, he extracted three intricately-engraved gold pins. "Seaxneat told me that we'd need these," Cempa remarked, unconvincingly.

"Pins?" Hoggard was floored. The lovely little Queen had been abducted for a measly trio of pins?

Cempa let out a riven sigh. Murdo strode up to stand very close to Cempa, peering at him as if seeing him for the very first time. Murdo asked in clear tones: "Maybe Seaxneat gave you the pins to mind, but ask yourself, man: How did he come by them?"

"He is a god," came the bold reply. "He gathers and garners as his mind takes him."

"No ... in this case, you are wrong. Those are Glenowan's pins ... and he will want them back ..."

There was now a sinister note in Murdo's voice.

Rainard frowned deeply, pointing towards Cempa. "Start from the beginning. I've well-and-truly lost the thread of this tale. Tell us all about how you came to steal the horse, kidnap the lady and have rune stones and pins?"

"It was all Elwyd's fault, if you must know," Cempa said, peevishly.

Elwyd, rubbing salve into his badly-injured leg, sat up, looking astounded. "Me?"

"Had you not been about to wed, then Seaxneat would have chosen **you** for the deed."

Rainard was still unconvinced. "He told you that, did he? Seaxneat?"

Reece was very sceptical. "What does he look like?"

The Queen asked quickly: "Don't you believe him?"

Cempa sighed long and loud, shaking his head. "He's a huge, strong man. If he picked a fight with you ... well, you'd run away rather than take up his challenge. Red hair, he has, and a big, square jaw. And stark naked."

The wonderlings looked from one to the other in amazement.

"He held up a hand to me like this and said 'Attend!', just like that. I turned to stone where I stood, unable to move my feet. He told me just what I needed to know, and no more. That the gods were angry against the new religion. That one god must become the chief of the gods, and force the new religion to drown in the sea, to sink under the waves. I was to take into my care Netta-Vere, and

carry her to Blen a'Moor for the biggest war which ever this Earth had seen. Seaxneat was firm that you wonderlings would follow me; that we would all march together to avenge the goddess Erce."

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END OF CHAPTER XI

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER XII

"Lovely that you could join us, Vicar. This is my special best friend, Reggie Thorrock, who's making huge waves in the field of journalism." And with that, Mignonette smiled dazzlingly before waltzing off to join her mother (Lady Deidre) in welcoming the other guests.

The Vicar, beaming, murmured something about "joy" and "welcome". Reg, watching the man of the cloth closely, nodded, muttering about his "gladness" and "delight".

Reg marvelled at that skill which so many other people had; that which he had not. The Vicar definitely had it. Why he, Reg pondered.

It was truly amazing: that precise art of managing to stand about with a delicate china teacup balanced between finger and thumb, whilst at the same time wrestling with a miniscule cake fork and sponge cake portion. Unlike the Vicar, who was wafting on about gardening, in perfect control of the teatime paraphernalia, Reg was making a bad fist of it. He absolutely knew that his upper lip was covered in icing sugar, that his handkerchief was filthy (and must not under any circumstances be reefed out of his pocket unless he was hidden behind a tapestry screen), and that the serviette which had accompanied the cake seemed to have done a runner. Besides wishing to be anywhere

else, he now found himself in earnest conversation with the man of God. That worthy gentleman was evidently in full gush.

"We're all immensely fond of our cricket. Do you play at all, Lieutenant Thorrock?"

In sheer desperation, Reg dragged the side of his thumb along his upper lip. "Well, I do know one end of the bat from the other, if that's any help. I suppose I could bowl in an emergency. Middle-pace top-spin, me."

Another elderly gent, who had drifted into the Vicar's vicinity, and who likewise had the cup-fork-cake-napkin routine down pat, smiled warmly.

"You brought your flannels with you?"

"Er ... No, actually not. Put in mothballs while I was O.S. Can't find them. Have to borrow some."

"Oh, I'm sure Lady Steers-Barclay will run about and manage something. I say, you're not a 'keeper, by any chance? We're rather short of a wicket-keeper just now. Gerry unfortunately took our last 'keeper, although in all honesty I found that his mind was never wholly on the game."

Reg responded: "Bad luck." He was thoroughly sick of this messing about, so he gave it up. Without any further effort at grace and refinement, he took the whole wedge of cake and shoved it into his mouth in one go. Thankfully, if anyone had seen him, they chose to turn away. When he was finally able to speak again without spraying cakecrumbs on his audience, Reg assured the Vicar of his delight at the prospect of squatting frog-like behind the batsman, risking life and limb.

"Splendid!" the older man crowed, before he and his satellite trailed off to find another victim.

Thorrock now settled down to some serious eating. He was a big boy; people should realize that he was in need of substantial fare, rather than these fairy-serves. Reg discovered (by accident) that the

tiny sandwich points which were intended to be eaten singly could be devoured three at a time. His eye passed over the sweet little petit fours (cissy food!) and alighted on the fruitcake. Reg snuggled his frame into a comfortable armchair, alongside a chappie who turned out to be a devoted angler. Now that he had a large plate of food, he enjoyed an animated discussion on the glories of trout fishing with his new-found friend.

Not much time had passed when Mignonette ran him to ground: "Oh there you are, Dearest Reg. May I fetch you a cup of tea?"

His lady really was a joy to behold. She cared about him, Reg realized. She really wanted him to be happy in her company. So he smiled at her. "Yes, thanks. Lovely. You are an angel." Of course, he actually wanted a beer ... perhaps better not.

In a few moments, the beautiful creature returned to him. "How glad everyone is that I dredged you up, Reggie. They're all so chuffed that we've finally got ourselves a wicket-keeper."

"The other chap died during active service, I believe. Bit of a bad show."

"Yes, tragic. But he wasn't very good. At 'keeping, that is."

"You'll have to tear around and get me some togs, you know."

"But Reggie ... I told you to bring your whites with you!"

"Where they have disappeared to, no-one knows. They'll be in a trunk somewhere, no doubt."

At all events, the Steers-Barclay crowd found him something suitable to wear. It seemed that these people were quite nutty about their cricket. One of the lawns actually contained a pitch. Just now one gardener was rolling same, as another deftly set up the stumps and bails. The chaps who were playing cricket (rather than umpiring or spectating) were mostly old Etonians. It was very sporting

and gracious of them to include Reg so willingly in their game. They had also dragooned the sous-chef into service: he was reportedly a demon fast bowler.

The Vicar was the umpire at square leg, and another toothy fellow served as the umpire at the wicket. The undergardener was scorer. All the servants were dragged outdoors to provide "willing" spectators. They lazed about in a sea of deckchairs, under the shade of linden trees, hugely enjoying themselves away from their more mundane chores.

Mignonette and her mother doled out sashes (blue or red) to all the players. The coin was tossed and the Blue team's captain (a worried-looking man with a bushy moustache) called out: "We'll have a turn with the willow, I believe." Reg's sash was red. Padded up and feeling ridiculous, Reg duly marched up to the wicket, nodded a brief "good luck" to the batsman, then took up the "frog" position of the 'keeper. Yes, everyone was awfully serious about the game. And Reg's captain (the man leading the Red team) was Sir Peter Steers-Barclay. That meant: ***the pressure was on ...***

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Funnily enough, for all their expressed love of cricket, the sundry Old Etonians and their ilk who had gathered on the green sward weren't all that proficient at the sport. It didn't take Reg very long at all to get into the swing of 'keeping. He knew the rules of cricket awfully well, and was fit and strong to boot. Reg took a couple of dramatic catches, dutifully shouting "Mine!" in the nick of time; one of which catches caused him to perform a full backwards tumble roll, much to the crowd's delight. He stumped his angler friend, when that gentleman moved too far from the wicket. Then, in a very exciting period in the play, Reg shied the ball at the stumps, leaving the batsman short of safety by half a yard. The bails span drunkenly through the air.

"Out!" shouted the Vicar, raising an index finger.

Much more at home with the bat, when his turn came to wield the willow, Reg smacked the ball about, hitting fours and sixes. Clearly, he was by far the best player on the field. A couple of chaps

chaired Reg from the pitch at game's end; Sir Peter was brimming with pride as he heartily shook Reg's hand, even going to the lengths of pressing a cigar into his young friend's top pocket.

All told, Reg had made a blindingly good impression. Well worth a day's excellent sport for that!

Yes, Reg was under no illusion. This "good show" at cricket had more or less cemented his position in Sir Peter's good graces, and the doors of the top newspaper offices were very much open to him. Mignonette was looking prettier every day, and seemed to be completely swept off her feet by her heroic swain. Things weren't really so grisly after all.

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Not so very long after Reg's momentous performance, there was a weekend gathering at Shorning Lodge, which was to provide that young man with a chance to pop the question. There were several likely moments. However, Reg discarded these moments as not private enough. Itinerant guests had the infernal habit of entering a room just as a chap was trying to strike the correct romantic posture. Can't have the Bishop's good lady wafting into the sitting room as one lowers oneself onto one's knee, now can one?

The woods, with the freshness of the air, and the rusticity of the scenery, provided the perfect backdrop for the ardour-filled young gentleman. Really, there could not have been a better opportunity. Mignonette had been persuaded at the last moment to join the walkers, with the result that she wore quite the wrong footwear. Reg and his love had stopped to investigate a curious fungus which grew on the trunk of an aged larch. The other companions had all trooped on ahead. In fact, Reg and the lovely girl were alone, amidst the infrequent calling of birds, and the scuffle of small animals in the undergrowth.

Reg took Nettie's hand, to assist her safe passage down a stone-covered bank, and thence across a dear little brook. Here was the chance for which Thorrock had waited all weekend.

"Here! You can't possibly struggle across this brook in those confounded slippers you're wearing. I'll carry you, if I may."

Reg saw nothing untoward in scooping the startled beauty into his arms, in order to stride across the stepping stones as he carried her.

Mignonette was quite touched. "The very soul of romance, Reggie. What a chivalrous gentleman you are, at heart. I'd no idea."

Reg reached the other side of the brook, where all that was left for him was to bound up the uneven bank. Reg achieved this feat with ease, if not much grace. Still bearing the girl in his arms, the young man admired the picturesque surroundings. The sunlit woods were particularly charming on that afternoon.

"Reg, you may put me down now. I'm quite safe, you know. But I do think it quite thrilling of you to lug me across the torrents, so gallantly."

"Why don't you press your lips against mine really hard, instead of rabbiting on in this meaningless way. I have to propose, and need to get myself readied-up for it."

Giggling sweetly, Mignonette complied with her lover's demand.

"Mmm," purred Reg, when he could. "Delicious. No, I can't put you down. Have to propose. Seems like a good enough chance. Everyone else has gone on ahead. Finally get a few words with you."

Miss Steers-Barclay was stunned and delighted. "Reggie! Propose? Oh, but on bended knee, surely."

Reg laughed. "Hardly on my knees. Get all dirty. Silly idea, really. No, much better stand here, Nettie, with all this beauty about me, and all this loveliness in my arms. You will, won't you? Marry me, I mean."

"Oh, Reggie! How simply wizard! Of course I shall marry you. You've made me ever so happy. But what on earth took you so long?"

"I was going to ask you to become my wife last night, when we were playing bridge, and you were being very clever ("shrewd" I believe is the word) **and** very pretty simultaneously. But with Lady Harpie glaring at me --"

"Lady Harper, you goose!" chuckled Mignonette. "And one ordinarily does not make marriage proposals during a bridge game."

"The upshot was that under her malevolent eye, I wasn't feeling very brave."

"Well, I'm jolly glad that you finally worked up the courage, Reg. Let me tell you that I was becoming quite worried. In fact, I was about to accept a most advantageous offer from Montie Partlington." This with a provocative pout.

Reg Thorrock was absolutely horrified. "**Montie Partlington?**" he gasped. "Nettie, you were actually thinking of wedding Montie Partlington? No damn it! Utterly appalling!"

"He's an awfully decent fellow, and Pater rather likes him."

"Heavens above, the man's next-door to being an absolute idiot. What on earth could inspire your father to like that nincompoop?"

"I seem to remember that Partlington Senior and Daddy were at Eton together," said Mignonette, airily. "But I might be mistaken on that point."

"Well, that could be the only reason, then," argued Reg.

The girl (already ebullient) brightened even more: "I say! I've just had a blinding thought. You'll have to confront the ancestral Pater to ask for my hand. How delicious!"

"Ah, so we must be old-fashioned about this, must we? Just as if we were still foot-slogging about in Saxon England."

The pair of lovers both sighed together. Looking adoringly into each other's eyes, they recalled another wood, in another time, when they had shared a very hard, passionate kiss. "Oh, Reg ... what a wonderful time we had of it ..."

Reg, still bearing his burden, sounded decisive: "At all events, I have no objection to bearding your father. Do it this evening. Then, during the week, I'll buy you a flashy ring and make it all right and tight."

The beautiful London socialite gave a thrilled giggle, hugging her fiance warmly.

"However, dearest Reg, there's still the issue of your name. Not to be uncivil or anything, but I simply *can't* be known as 'Mrs Thorrock'. Is there no way that we could come up with a better surname? Let's think one up together: something really classy. Or no! You could have *my* name!"

"My dear future wife, I've already come up with a ripping solution to that one. Not that 'Thorrock' isn't a sensible, solid English name, mind. But what I thought was that I'd work hard at this journalist business, become excessively rich and acquire a handsome title. So, you'll eventually become Lady So-and-So in the long run. Of course, that must mean that you'll be Mrs T for a few years whilst I claw my way to the top, but that won't stretch you too much, will it?"

"Oh Reggie! What an unfathomable toot you are! We'll be wonderful nobles, truly we will."

They kissed. Theirs was a loving, warm, affectionate embrace. Reg and Nettie were absurdly in love, the man still holding his future bride in his arms after having carried her across the rippling brook.

"Happy?" murmured Reg, nuzzling into her cheek.

"As a lark, my divine, darling Reggie. As a lark!"

One of the chaps called to them from the top of the hill.

Miss Steers-Barclay laughed deliciously. "Be quiet, John. Mr Thorrock is busy proposing," she called back.

The proposal duly continued, on and on ...

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END OF CHAPTER XII

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER XIII

The tiny display case was in a remote corner of the Royal Danish Naval Museum. Andre "Paul" Harnel and Anne Thorrock stood side-by-side, staring down into the small, glass-sided box. There, on a ruched remnant of purple satin, lay the set of jewellery which Henrith had given to Fynne on her wedding day.

"To think, Paul, I've actually held that lot in my hands."

"Did it scratch the skin, Petite?"

"I've only worn it the once, and then it all had to come off again, for the wedding night. Apart from that, I don't suppose I'll ever find out, now."

"If I recreate this masterpiece for you, Cherie, it will by far be the most expensive thing in your life, and you'll die an old woman still in debt to me."

Anne laughed. "That bad?"

Paul nodded sadly. He was not at all what Anne had expected. After all the letters wending back and forth over the Channel, and the couple of telephone calls, Anne had expected a *point-de-vice*, mature gentleman: smartly dressed and oozing charm. The real Andre Harnel was a smelly, rough-looking character looking quite down-and-out, in spite of his fortune. He had travelled from Paris to Copenhagen on a train, in third class, smoking Gitanes as he argued on the subject of The Resistance with a dispeptic clerk. However, that aside, Paul had listened sympathically to Anne's halting tale of the Jutish "wonderlings".

Paul took Anne's hand and kissed it. "For you, *Petite*, I'll do this ver' good thing. And this will cost you *rien*. So ... I'll take the black stuff ...er ... the soot ... the ... the embers ...*le fusain* ..."

"Charcoal?" Anne provided, hopefully.

"*Eh, bien!* Harnel will take a piece of the charcoal and sketch for you this treasure. And mount my work in a so beautiful frame. For you, lovely Anne. *Oui?* Yes? Does this march far to compensate for the loss of Fynne's jewels?"

"Paul! That is the kindest thing. I'll treasure it all my life. Thank you."

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"Hello? Thorrock here."

"Yes. Is that Mr Charles Thorrock?"

Of course it was. Joan knew his voice by now. But it **was** odd, there being no long-distance rigamarole from a brisk telephonist. "How are you, Joan?"

"Oh, this is not Joan. I'm her sister, Ingrid. Are you free, Mr Thorrock? Or is this a bad time to telephone you?" For all the world, this was Joan's voice. Her voice, indeed, with its tuneful Gaelic lilt, but filled with a kind of unbridled merriment.

"No, no. I'm quite free. Is ... is everything alright?"

"Oh, aye. Fine. I've been home for the weekend, and my sister packed me off with a lovely jersey for you. She knitted it herself. I was just wondering if I could get it to you somehow?"

Thorrock was touched, and a little guilt-ridden. "Why, that's very kind. I –"

"Joan's told me all about you and I must admit that I'm dead keen to meet you. I'm a teacher, and I've a position at Derriedale school. But I've not any transport and you're a wee distance off. You're in South London, aren't you?"

"Yes. But look here! I'm working on a job at Leighton, which isn't more than ten miles from Derriedale. I could motor over tomorrow at lunchtime. Would that be alright?"

"Sure! That sounds terrific."

Charles arranged to meet Miss Symington at around about half-past twelve on the following day, at the gates of Derriedale school. When he replaced the telephone receiver in its cradle, he stared at the wall in deep contemplation. Joan's sister ... Joan had barely mentioned having a sister. Well, that was hardly surprising, as she seldom spoke of anything much at all. It was all strained conversations, long silences and sighing!

Thorrock wandered over to one of Reg's fat armchairs and plonked himself down in it. Unconsciously, he reached for his pot of beer and drank. Joan's sister ...

He had fallen head-over-heels in love with Joan for only one reason: that she was the incarnation of Reece, the one true love of his life. Madly, and with no thought for the future, he had ploughed ahead with this whirlwind romance, telling himself at all times how amazingly wonderful it was to find her. And yet he shared not one thing with this girl. There existed not one common thread, not a single shared interest, which would bind their lives together.

Reece had lived and breathed, and he had grabbed her to him to kiss her with unbridled passion. Even now, Charles could close his eyes and smell the delicious scent of the blossoms in Reece's hair and around her neck. And the voice! He could hear her laughter as she bantered with her kinsmen. Her soothing whisper touched his ear as she leaned close to him. The woman who was now the centre of his world was not Reece. No, not by a long shot. Even dear old Reggie had sensed that fact.

Joan was soft, gentle and demure. Not only did he have to work hard at one-sided conversation, but jokes had to be explained to Joan; she raised her eyebrows and gave a weak titter, for the subject matter was usually over her head. As soon as he had thrown himself at her, Charles Thorrock was restless to be away: bored and discontented. It was true that Joan was almost Reece's double, and yet there could not be two women so opposite in personality. And now she had lovingly knitted him a pullover ... Why had he not told her that he hated hand-knits? It would be his punishment to have to wear the bloody thing.

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Later, smarting with regret, but nevertheless resigned, Thorrock drove off from Leighton, eating his sandwiches at the wheel. Derriedale was a very pretty spot, of solid worth, comprised of lush gardens and middle-class homes. He found the village school. It was the very stuff of picture postcards with its delightful buildings and rambling garden.

Ingrid Symington stood under a tree around which a circular wooden bench had been erected. A bevy of eager children vied for her attention, as she waited for Thorrock with a big brown-paper parcel clutched to her chest. Toffee-coloured curls danced in the breeze. She wore her glorious hair

pulled back from her face, fastened with large tortoise-shell combs. However, stray strands of hair had escaped, giving her a fairy-like appearance. In looks, she was clearly Joan's sister, and as like to Reece as Joan had been. She spoke, in that musical voice, turning her attention from the insistent children, to Charles and then back to the students again. Her whole face was mobile and intense: with frowns or smiles as the boys and girls chivvied her. Then she would glance at Charles and radiate sunshine with her cheeky grin.

Charles was unable to speak. At any second, he knew, the girl would scramble back onto the pony's back, and reach down her hand to him, her voice edged with fear.

Unexpectedly, Ingrid stepped forward, away from the children, handing over the brown paper parcel. "There you are, Sergeant Thorrock." Unthinkingly, Charles took the parcel.

His voice deep, Charles finally managed to utter: "Reece! wena me pine seoce gedydon, pine seldcymas ..."

[Reece! I just feel sick that we aren't together often enough ...]

His words of anguish were met with a light laugh. "If you're trying to speak Gaellic Mr Thorrock, you're a wee way off the mark."

"Oh ... I'm trying to --" He was all at sea, bumbling whereas he was normally confident, even brash when talking to girls.

Kindly, Ingrid patted Charles's arm. "I'll let Joanie know that I've safely delivered her handiwork to you. And I'll leave it to you to thank her. So ... I'd better return to my wee charges. Good day to you, Mr Thorrock. It really was grand to finally meet you."

Stupidly, Charles watched her disappear amongst the leaves of the hedge. He stood stock still. He was quite unable to move off.

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It was not in Charles Thorrock's nature to give up without a fight. When the schoolbell rang in the charming village of Derriedale, a bevy of mothers stood about chatting in the shade of the many graceful trees thereabouts, ready to collect their sons and daughters. And with them stood the erstwhile Sergeant of the British Armed Forces. He fell into conversation with a delightful group of young women, who had all been busy making jam at one of the houses. He laughed and joked with them, surreptitiously awaiting the re-appearance of Miss Symington. In fact, the dear little mothers pointed out to our Charles what might be a good vantage point for his quest.

When he did spot the pretty teacher, Charles sprinted off, excusing himself quickly to his new friends. And excusing himself to Ingrid Symington for his failure to properly explain himself to her earlier in the afternoon. The girl seemed impressed on this second occasion of their meeting. So Charles pressed home the advantage, and asked her politely to accompany him to the nearby Yorkshire Tea Room, where he promised her a magnificent spread of cakes and sandwiches. The girl readily accepted his invitation; but only on account of her misunderstanding his intention regarding her sister.

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As she sat on the bench which curved around the private booth which Charles had chosen, Ingrid pleasantly asked: "So, how are you and Joan managing with this long-distance romance? It can't be very easy for either of you."

"It's not."

"Joan isn't all that happy about it. Did you know that? She hates never seeing you. And only the odd telephone call."

"I've been meaning to travel North on my next free weekend. But there never seems to be one lately."

"You see where I'm coming from, though, don't you? Joan's so rushed off her feet with going out on dates wi' you that she's had time to knit a man's pullover. Furthermore, she's a very slow knitter ..."

Charles was crushed by this guilt-trip, which he so richly deserved. "Ah, I'm sorry. I do try to ring her when I --"

"Mr Thorrock! If you love my sister, then why don't you set a date for the wedding? That would give her something to look forward to, surely."

Charles felt as if some chap or other was about to wander into the teashop, intent on whacking him in the stomach with a cricket bat. He even peeked over his shoulder. However, the waitress loomed up just then, bearing an enormous teatray, smiling pleasantly. Ingrid took over, all composure, certainty and capability. Thorrock knew that if he spent the rest of his days with this lovely creature, he would be absurdly happy.

They were absorbed for a few minutes in the teatime ceremony. Ingrid tried to make him comfortable with a selection of the best on offer. It wasn't much.

"When I was a wee lass, Sergeant Thorrock, we ate food that had been made from real foodstuffs from our own farm. Eggs, butter, milk, honey, fresh fruit and vegetables ... my people provided all the basics of life for the family. But since the War, everything is tossed together with dried this and tinned that ... Nothing ever tastes as good as it did then. Do you find that?"

Charles grinned. "Aye, I do."

Ingrid had the grace to blush. "I'm sorry, I really am. You've asked me out, and here I am doing nothing but grouse."

"Will you call me 'Charles'?"

"Well, Charles, why are you holding back with my sister?"

Charles stalled, as he toyed with a difficult cream-filled cake.

"I'm not sure if she told you, Charles, but her fiance was an airman who didn't come back from bombing Dresden. She was always quiet and shy, but that personal loss sort of ... Well, ever since then, my Joanie has been wistful, sad. I think that some men find that attractive in a lassie; but that other men don't ..."

Thorrock had not ever before in his entire life met a girl who was reasonable, common-sensical, competent ... and good looking all in one delightful bundle of charms. It was well and truly time to make a clean breast of it. "Ingrid, there's no way that I could possibly marry your sister."

"Joan is in love with you and expects you to propose marriage at any minute."

"I fell in love with her face. We've nothing in common."

"Oh, Charles ... You're not the first chappie to say that. She's been disappointed before. But somehow I thought that **you** were different."

Charles could not swallow another morsel. The food already in his mouth was claggy: he had to wash it down with a mouthful of scalding tea. Was this lassie looking into his soul?

"I realized immediately that there was nothing there. I'm sorry for hurting Joan, if I have hurt her."

"Charles, if you knew that there was no hope for a match, then why did you sweep her off her feet as you did?"

"She reminds me of the girl whom I *really* love."

That statement of fact floored Ingrid Symington as had nothing else that he had previously uttered.

"Then why don't you marry *her*: the *real* love of your life?"

"Because ... Because she died well over 1300 years ago."

"Och! This is rubbishy talk. Why don't you make sense?"

"I have to let Joan down gently. I hope that you will help me there. If you would."

Ingrid quickly reached for the napkin. She dabbed at her lips, then (hoping that her companion would not notice) at the corners of her eyes.

Ingrid was unhappy. "Have you had enough tea? I want to get out of here."

Charles uttered a brief: "Sure." They stood, Charles paid for the tea, and then he escorted Ingrid out of the tea room.

Sadly, Charles conceded defeat: "I'll drive you home."

Surprisingly, this was not required. "No. I want to hear all about this funny business ... this 1300 years ago business."

"Well, what can I tell you?"

"There's a lovely walk along beside a stream, not far from here. You can tell me all the grim details whilst we stroll about."

"That sounds like the ticket. Do we walk there or drive?"

The pretty Scotswoman chuckled. "We drive. But it's no' far."

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"Does this ridiculous nonsense have anything to do with a bed, which cannot be approached until the first rays of sunlight kiss the darkness of the night?"

Charles grinned. "The devil-bed. Joan told you about it ..."

"It's the strangest thing I've ever heard of. First of all, your cousin ... the nurse."

"Anne."

"Aye, Anne. And then you, yourself. Then my sister."

"But that didn't lead anywhere, I'm afraid."

"No, it wouldn't have. You've described your Reece to me, and a lady less like my Joanie there could not be."

"Perhaps I was mistaken. Perhaps Reece is you."

"We'll see. But where did we get up to? After Joan failed ..."

"Then Reggie (who's Anne's brother) had a go, and then his lovely Miss Steers-Barclay."

"Am I your last hope, then?"

"No, there's one more. The chap who doubles as Elwyd is playing hard-to-get."

Ingrid nodded. The scenery surrounding the stream was picturesque and verdant. Ingrid stood beside the water, marvelling at the beauty of this area. It was perfect. And the man and girl were quite alone here. She felt no surprise when Charles came up behind her, holding her shoulders in his hands, and kissing her hair. His voice was no more than a deep whisper. In the old language, Charles spoke of the moon-touched spiders which wove webs from his heart to hers. Her bravery and native skill had won his admiration and love. Then, too, Reece's beauty burned itself into his innards, causing him to feel real illness when she was no longer by his side. All this, Charles Thorrock spoke in the long, lost tongue of the Jutes.

There seemed to be no point, Ingrid reasoned, in fighting Sergeant Thorrock, for he was off in another time with other people. So, when he twisted her around to face him, deeply murmuring endearments to her in that strange yet beautiful lingo, she allowed him to do so. Tacitly, she permitted him to cup her chin in one hand whilst he lovingly stroked her hair with the other. The poor man was really too far gone to receive the protest which rose to her lips as he gathered her into his arms in a long, passionate embrace. The kissing was very good, as was the hugging and stroking. His hand on her breast -- well, she simply ignored **that** as best she could. So, the couple continued for several minutes, both with their eyes shut. Missing the sumptuous view!

Finally, they broke apart. Charles captured Ingrid's wrist. "I can't marry your sister, because I want to marry **you**."

"But was that **me**, Charles, or the other lass? I'm not Reece, you know, even though I resemble her."

"I love you both, equally."

Ingrid pretended to be offended. "You are absolutely wicked. You are a devil."

Charles grinned, kissing her. "Try the bed before you decide whether I'm the Devil or not."

Ingrid tried for a firm voice: "Aye, I'll lay down upon your bed, Sergeant, but I'll be all alone when I do it, mind!"

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END OF CHAPTER XIII

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER XIV

Anne stood beside the sitting room window, twiddling with the lace curtains as she stared unseeing into the street. "You know, folks, we really should go to church."

"Are we all C of E?" Charles asked. He looked at Miss Steers-Barclay, for he was (of course) aware of the religious orientations of his family. There was a quick nod of agreement from that young lady.

"The vicar will probably die of shock when all four of us turn up unexpected, but ..." began Reg.

Anne responded quickly. "Vicars are up for anything, though, aren't they? I mean, he sat in our garden with us the other day and proved to be quite charming."

Reg had to agree. "Yes, he wasn't a bad bloke ... Suit and tie, is it? Do we wear a hat ... I can't for the life of me remember ..."

"No. Hats for the ladies only. And no funny business," Anne warned.

They prepared themselves. Anne was able to lend various items of apparel to Nettie. Both ladies looked very demure, with their floral hats, lace gloves and leather-bound prayer books. Charles scribbled a note for Ingrid, on whom they had checked before they trooped out the door.

Evensong.

There was such a lovely, British feel to it, the stroll along the streets in or near Danube Square to St Bartholemew's. The flower gardens, hedges, picket fences, stained glass fanlights and transoms, and ornamental fish ponds seemed to invest a special delicacy to an already glorious Sunday. The party could not believe their luck with the weather. And inside the church, lowering themselves into the pews such that they could gaze up at the impressive stained-glass windows, there was a wholesome sense of contentment experienced by our four friends. Indeed, Reverend Cartwright made an oblique reference to the burgeoning congregation, spoke comfortingly of the bishop's recuperation and delivered in sonorous tones those Holy words which took the spirit to a higher plane.

"We ought to do that more often," admitted Anne, as they strolled homeward in the gathering twilight. Reg smoked his usual Craven A, Charles a roll-your-own.

"Once in a blue moon is enough. Those pathetic faces on the coloured window thingies made me remember things." Reg had Mignonette's arm linked through his. "You know, scenes from the theatre of war." Mignonette squeezed his arm lovingly, and Reg coughed. "What I'm trying to say is that one is frantically trying to forget the desperate faces of those terrified boys who looked at one with cow eyes, seeking guidance and resolution ... and one was strong, brave, heroic and marvellous for them, except that I wasn't. Not really. I was just like Hoggard ... a wretched, lost boy myself."

The party walked on in silence for a few paces. Reg had to clear any misconceptions. "Look! What I mean is, it was this way ... I honestly think that I swanked through my entire Army service, giving the impression that I was --"

Charles came to his rescue. "I can vividly recall being in a tank which lumbered along as if a boat tossed by huge waves. Thinking: 'This is it'. And aiming my rifle, shooting into the blackness of a forest at nighttime. Watching sudden bursts of flame pointed in my direction ... No, I didn't put on a brave front nor pretend to be heroic. The reality of it was 'of the moment' as they say. Just kill or be killed."

Anne was nearly in tears. "All I did was mop-up the casualties in a makeshift hot-house which stood for a hospital in far-flung Borneo, for instance. Young men went into the fray as sound as bells, only to come out with bits missing. And you harden yourself to that. Or, at least, pretend to."

Mignonette had not been permitted to join the War effort overseas, and so she had joined her mother and several well-to-do friends in a Women's Auxiliary service, in London. But there was nothing like heroism to speak of, and so she kept quiet.

Anne sniffed. "Heavenly aroma. Must be that jasmine over there on that chicken wire. I did enjoy Evensong, truly. There was something quaint and old-fashioned about it."

Nettie piped up. "I could only sit there wondering what QNV was up to. Will your Ingrid be awake yet, Charles?"

"Probably not. Yes, it will be intriguing to hear what she has to say," responded Charles.

"Intriguing indeed! The final chapter in the tale, no doubt." The others nodded at Reg's comment. And so the party of four reached Reg's front gate. Anne had not admitted to the others that all through Evensong, she had imagined herself with Elwyd, making love for the first time ... feeling the strength and toughness of his body as he lay on her. Likewise, Charles's mind had been solely devoted to Ingrid throughout the sweet, traditional church service. And judging by Nettie's unaccustomed silence, she was off with the Jutes, too.

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None of our party had expected tears. Not just tears, mind you, but violent, despairing sobs. Charles took Ingrid in his arms upon her awakening, and it was nearly 15 minutes later before he appeared with his love in the sitting room. Meanwhile, Anne had prepared tea, scones and biscuits. The house fairly rang with the harrowing wildness of the female's emotions, along with Charles's crooning efforts at comfort. Reg looked displeased with this turn of events, Anne concerned and Nettie anxious.

"Oh, Reggie! I don't like the sound of that. Someone has died, for sure ..."

"It's alright, Nettie. They'd all be long dead by now, anyway, if you think of it."

The sobs subsided. In the sitting room, Ingrid refused an armchair, preferring instead to curl-up on the floor at Charles's feet, such that she could lean back against his legs as he stroked her hair. The poor lass was pale and distressed. She did, however, clasp a hot mug of milky coffee in her hands. This not only soothed her, but gave her something solid to concentrate on.

Anne, wearing a serviceable apron, stalked into the room, standing behind Nettie's capacious armchair. "Supper won't be long. Do you feel better now, Ingrid?"

Ingrid looked about at the eager faces before her. "Aye," was all her reply. Then without further conversation, Ingrid launched into a recapitulation of her dream, in her winsome, lilting Gaelic tones.

"The squabbling between the men turned into full-blown brawling. Rainard wanted nothing further to do with Derrie, Haewan and Shelf. Which was funny in its own way, as all these men thought that (since Cempa and the Queen had been found safe and sound), the best course of action was for the entire party to return to their kith and kin. Cempa would have none of that.

"So, the upshot was that Rainard and Cempa brawled. Hoggard sided with Elwyd and Cempa against his own brother, and that certainly made matters all the worse. For Cempa, there was an urgency ... a desperation to get to Blen a'Moor, to take part in this fight-to-the-death among the gods.

"At Blen a'Moor, Cempa took charge. Our leader, our champion was called a 'worthy', and his seconds (or 'aids', would you say?) were called 'sides'. So Cempa thought that he was the worthy in all this ... Apparently Seaxneat had again summoned him to explain that it was all or nothing, now. It was for Elwyd, Derrie, Cempa, Murdo and me to appear in good order, as summoned by Seaxneat for the fight. Rainard was bitterly stung by his exclusion. Hoggard was put in charge of that group to ensure that nobody decamped; and poor, wee Wilt cried into his hands for fear."

Reg leaned forward. "So, Ingrid, why was Seaxneat insistent on them all remaining, when only five people were required? That doesn't make sense to me."

"Five people ... one worthy and two on each side of him. That's how it figured. This must have been some kind of strange Jutish custom. Ah, I've never heard the like."

"And at the end ... the most gruesome, vile horror appeared to block our pathway. A large, laughing ghost-man, astride a towering, fiery horse."

"Glenowan!" shouted Charles. "I saw him once or twice just in brief snatches of dream."

"Aye, Glenowan it was. He was just the final straw. And *that's* why I was crying so piteously on waking ..."

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All alone, Murdo squatted in a little clearing, frenetically muttering to himself as he rolled his bones and his stones across the dirty patch of earth before him. Over and over again did he roll, squinting at his handiwork whilst poking at the various pieces with an old stick. At long last, he nodded sagely, thanked the bones, kissed the stones, then stowed all of his earthly helpers in their customary leather pouch. As Murdo stood up, a bolt of lightning forked into the woods, not far from his clearing.

"Be careful, there, man!" called Cempa.

Gingerly, Murdo scampered back to the group of wonderlings, as they huddled under their makeshift shelter. The faces were concerned, anxious.

"Do you know now what this unnatural show is all about?" croaked Derrie.

Murdo nodded, pushing his way under the shelter. "I believe so, yes, lads."

Derrie pointed to the West. "Away over there, further than a man could normally see, we noted a stray bolt of lightning sharply illuminating a rise on which stood a small group of men. Mayhap, they were wonderlings like us."

Murdo was interested. "Did you? That seems to settle it then. If you see same to the North or South, then my reckoning is right."

"And that is?"

"This is what my bones and stones told me; that the gods are at war, in that one of them must be the ruling force over heaven, hell and earth. It's all about the number 4, boys."

Elwyd drew a breath. A war between the gods sounded cataclysmic. What could come of this impasse?

"You lads must pick your worthy, who will fight on behalf of the god of the East, for that is where we now stand."

Derrie was quick to speak. "Our worthy must be brave and steadfast. If his sides are also clever and cunning, then that will pass muster."

Cempa nodded solemnly. "Then it is out of me and Elwyd as to who is the bravest. I'll not shed another ounce of blood trying to prove that. Clearly, my brother is the hero, whilst I am sewn from rougher cloth. So be it. So Elwyd it shall be. I'll stand aside to support him as his chief side."

Derrie agreed. "I'll gladly be Elwyd's side, as shall Reece. A cleverer girl never was seen."

Murdo looked at the men, one in turn. "Does any man here have an objection to a girl forming one of our party?"

Derrie asked cautiously if the gods would accept a female in this contest. Murdo had no notion that they would **not** allow a girl. The upshot was that Murdo called to the other members of the party with a resounding blast of his horn, pulling Reece aside to advise her of the rigours ahead.

"Now, I will not force a lass to take a man's role; but your wits are needed by the worthy and his sides. Will you willingly come into our party, Lady?"

Without hesitation, head held high, Reece enunciated clearly: "Of course." And she took her position on the hillock beside Derrie. Murdo stood to the right of Elwyd, who looked anxiously out over the moor, seeing only swirling darkness.

Out of the brooding, sullen stillness (punctuated only by the odd shaft of lightning), came a terrible whirring of wind and earth together. A horrid, dark cloud rolled over them, with thunder rumbling in tune with the earth tremors. Teeth clenched, the wonderlings braced themselves.

Murdo had to shout to be heard over the wind, over the groaning rocks. "The gods fear that their day is over, that the new beliefs from far lands have taken the folk from them. This is their final stand."

Elwyd shouted likewise: "Whom do the gods fight?"

"Each other."

"Then who do **we** fight for, if it is in favour of the East that we stand ... and who against?"

Murdo did not answer. The sky and the land crashed about, in a most terrifying display. The wind whooshed over them, the rain beat upon them, and fiery lightning smashed into the ground about where they stood.

Now the thunder sounded like a booming voice. Murdo grabbed Elwyd's sodden sleeve, tugging it quickly.

"You are the worthy, Elwyd. Tell the gods that you fight for Eostre (goddess of the Earth), for the East, and for the season Spring."

"I don't understand, Murdo --"

"Tell them!"

Elwyd gulped, then shouted into the wind: "I, Elwyd of the Federation of Jutish Folk, do stand four-square in the face of these mighty shows of strength, crying out that I do support Eostre, the Earth, the East and Springtime."

Reece was insistent: "And say for Queen Netta-Vere, as well."

Murdo balked. "How does that help our cause?"

Reece was urgent. "Nay, say it Atheling Elwyd."

Elwyd shouted: "For Eostre, the Earth, the East, Spring, and for Queen Netta-Vere; she of the Near Treeland."

Cempa asked in a harsh whisper why Reece thought it fitting to include his erstwhile kidnap victim.

"Think, Cempa. She was dragged all this way for a reason. This *must* be it!"

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The menacing cloud which seemed to hang ominously over the heads of the wonderlings backed away. Murdo made a pleased "Ah!" sound.

Away to the North rumbled the cloud. More lightning followed, but it was directed at another group of men. The wonderlings could see these other athelings due to the fearsome electrical activity in the Heavens. As the focus of the storm moved, westward, then to the South, Murdo became more and more confident.

"Worthy Elwyd, and all his sides, behold this drama unfolding. The four points will fight. To the North is Tiw, the sky-father, the star-father, who was once our great war god, until he fell from grace. He will fight for the air: for the clouds, the wind, the firmament, and for the sky which holds the burning sun."

"And his season?" piped-up Reece.

"That will, I reckon, be Autumn. Yes, the wind rushes to push away the lazy days of Summer. He will be Autumn, personified." Murdo chuckled into his beard.

Elwyd asked: "Can we best Tiw, who stands for the North, for the Air ... and for Autumn? Will he not push the Earth aside?"

Murdo sounded excited. "We may not have to fight. I believe that we have hitched ourselves to the best god, to the winner. And all through Queen Netta-Vere. I hope that I'm right ..."

Spellbound, the wonderlings watched the distant weather, listening to Murdo's continued explanation.

"Here comes the first defeat! Here we have Fire, in the South. That god who thinks to smash all the others will in fact be the first god beaten. He is our mighty Welund, whom you will know as the master blacksmith, fashioning horseshoes, armour and swords which know no peer. Look at his sweating worthy! If only you could see him ... eyes burning like a wolf's: fiery and dangerous. There he stands, with his sinewy arms, his hammer, his forge, his anvil and bellows. Ruddy with the heat of his work, his face glows in the firelight as sparks fly about him."

Here Murdo shouted triumphantly: "Hell fries with its mad flames!"

Derrie was very worried by this turn. "Oh, Elwyd! Can you vie such a foe? Can you worst him?"

Murdo is calmer, more conspiratorial. "This man who supports Welund is the Sun, is the Summer, is the South. And do you think that your enemy Fire will strip the Earth bare in seconds? But wait ... here is the nub of the fight. Look to the West, my friends, look to the West."

Barely able to suppress their fearful gasps, the wonderlings watched in horror as a mighty conflagration (fire on fire on fire) swept from the South towards the West.

"Horrible! Horrible!" shouted Derrie, covering his face with his hands.

Murdo clipped him swiftly over the ear. "Stand firm, foolish Derrie. If the girl can stand by without blenching, then you can, also. For mark you, the god of the West is Helith. He that supports Helith must cleave to the rain, the clouds, rivers, brooks and streams. To the sea, lake and pond and even

to puddles on a track. Aye! He must love the fishes, the whales, the water snakes and even the fog of the early morning."

Reece provided the rest of the tale, concerning Helith: "He must be the Winter god, with his snow and chill: the chill of cold water. And do you think that the god of the West, by deed of his worthy will bring Welund's worthy to heel?"

"I do. Watch it unfold, sweet lady. For all his bluster and brash firestorms, Helith's water will quench that fire, and put Welund out of the contest."

The athelings who stood four-square for Helith, the god of water, now turned their attention to the wonderlings, for Spring, in the East, had not yet entered the competition. But then, neither had Autumn. The air was the strongest force, able to buffet the earth, able to shift the water. Instead of drowning the Earth, the West folk now had to fight the North folk. The fight now centred on the ownership of the lightning, of all things. The clouds held the lightning, and so the Autumn folk, they of the Air, would clearly control that element. However, the worthy of the West, that atheling who had beaten Welund's men, called out to the heavens that he had quenched the fire, thus owning the shafts of fire-spears which even now rained over the Earth.

Murdo could not have been more delighted. "Look, Elwyd! And all you sides! Look what befalls us now! The Water and the Air clash with mighty purpose, smashing and crashing about. They will tire soon, and the wind will fade. And the water will lay about, with hardly a ripple to break the smooth surface. Be ready, Elwyd. For soon your turn will come. Tell them how mighty the Earth is."

Elwyd was no orator. What could he say?

Reece, sensing his hesitation, asked quickly if she could be the mouthpiece for the wonderlings.

As the terrifying black clouds moved over them, Murdo called out: "Let the East speak. Let the woman of the East speak."

He pushed Reece forward. As Murdo did so, Reece took her place in the annals of Saxon history, to become the mightiest of the wonderlings.

"All the gods and goddesses, hear me. Spring is the season when Eostres hatches the chicks, gives up the baby lambs from their dams' wombs, and pierces the hard Winter ground with new flower buds. The Earth takes from the fiery Sun, from the soothing breezes of the Air and from the gentle raindrops of the Water. Earth needs and loves all these things. Put aside your anger, you gods, and look on Queen Netta-Vere as the very soul of Earth, of Spring. Beauty touches her every part. She sings and dances with a loveliness that no god could despise. Let our glorious Queen be your inspiration to bow to each other, and marvel at our Earth, which nothing can destroy."

There was silence. Derrie took Reece's hand and kissed it. Murdo patted her shoulder. Above them, the wonderlings were surprised to see the swift parting of the clouds. All of the wild weather which had threatened them moved off to the West, to the South and to the North. All above the hillock on which the wonderlings stood, the moon gleamed welcomingly.

"Can we go now?" Elwyd asked.

Murdo cleared his throat. "I'm very tired. I'll find me a nook so that I may curl up and sleep." Here, with a mere wave of his hand, Murdo stumped off into the woods. "Go off on your fargang, and good luck to you all," he called back over his shoulder. They were dismissed.

"I can go home to my lovely wife. And you, Reece, will bond with my wife's elder brother." Elwyd was as tired as Murdo, but did not think it right to say so.

"And I might go home as a hero, rather than as a cowardly outlaw," sighed Cempa.

The little group (Cempa, Elwyd, Reece and Derrie) strolled back towards the other wonderlings, in the silvery moonlight.

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Derrie was in full flight.

"Why, if it hadn't been for the lovely Reece and her knowing how to address the Heavens ... why, we would have been lying in the dirt, for sure."

"Hush, Derrie. My cheeks redden with your wanton chatter."

"But it's not far from the truth," argued Elwyd. "Give me a sword fight, or a target for my spear or arrow, and I am your worthiest worthy. When it comes to framing words and calling out to placate the gods, leave me out of it!"

"We were so very frightened for you all," breathed Queen Netta-Vere. Reece grinned, going over to the pony and taking the lovely girl's hand in her own. Reece kissed the back of the queenly hand, then patted it. "Without you, we were nothing. Why don't you lead us in one of your merry tunes?"

The last thing which the men wished for was community singing. Rainard smarted with his exclusion from Elwyd's sides, and Hoggard was consumed with self-loathing on account of his injury. Elwyd and Cempa were just dog-tired. Derrie, as expected, could think of no greater delight than warbling in the moonlit night with his friends. And so, the beauteous queen raised her lovely voice, to trill a lilting melody.

Horses and ponies were doled-out as appropriate, and the dogs quickly came to heel. Onward trudged the little party of wonderlings, now minus Murdo. His job was done (or so they all thought). Wilt would miss the lively yarns which Murdo had told him in that thrilling, wide-eyed voice. It seemed that Murdo (in the manner of aging men) intended that his lore would be passed down to the next generation. And Wilt was a very likely candidate, being a good boy who was like to grow to manhood and even to old age.

Even in their celebration on behalf of the East and all the elements thereto, the wonderlings were crushed with fatigue and home-longing. Shelf entertained them with a long saga of fear-share in winterwater, when man and whale fought over the rights to an Icelandic island named Scravin. There, in the ice-path, in the doom-days, the bitter folk of Scravin took spear and whale-shaft, striking out into the blue-white of the wintersea in leather curraghs, in order to best the whale. This grim tale of blood-lust, of sharp-peaked bare rocks droned on and on. Yet the wonderlings were enthralled. When Shelf was done, and applauded for his entertainment (even if it was of a dour and unpleasant nature), the lovely Queen and Derrie tried again for a song. But the wonderlings felt more and more dismal. They felt the weight of some terrible tragedy on their shoulders.

And on a lovely Summer day, when the earth brought forth her most wonderful beauties, the wonderlings rounded a bend in their path to find that their way was well-and-truly blocked. A large man in a hooded cape sat astride an enormous beast. The rider was well-equipped with jet-black shield and golden sword. About his head, there seemed to hang a malevolent mist -- quite out of character for this glorious Summer day. The horse tossed its head, snorting aggressively, and poring the rocky ground.

"Glenowan!" breathed Wilt. "And the horse is Vegas. 'Tis magical, that horse. And the rider is the most feared ghost ever to be seen."

"How do you know this, boy?" snapped Cempa.

"Murdo told me," came back the boy's reply.

"Well, you are right, little man. This is Glenowan, and this is his famed mount, Vegas." Cempa's jaw set hard. "And he will not stop until he retrieves the three nightmare pins which I have hidden on my body."

Elwyd became very grim. In truth, Cempa had transferred the pins to himself, in complete secrecy from the other wonderlings. Elwyd feared death not a jot; but he wanted to live so that he could

hold Fynne one more time. Even more, he feared that his half-brother would be slaughtered for nothing.

In this garnering atmosphere of gloomy threat, Queen Netta-Vere became afraid. She wept. And (without wanting anyone to see her), Reece wept, too.

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There was a long silence. Ingrid, Anne and Nettie mopped their streaming eyes with lady-sized handkerchiefs. The two men blinked and blew their noses. The friends in Reg's sitting room were all thinking the same thing: the appearance of another "difficulty" at the end of Ingrid's dream meant that there was more to come. And worse still, that they had run out of people to lure into the horror-bed, discounting Captain Beauchamps, of course.

Out of this anguish, Angus Reginald Thorrock subsequently floored the assembled friends.

"You may as well know that I intend to sleep in my bed tonight with my fiancée. She can't possibly sleep on her own, you know. Not after all that's gone forward. We're getting married anyway, so ... You know, I don't like to beat about in the woods with a stick, so I'll tell you all to your faces. And I trust that nobody has any religious scruples in that direction."

It was clear to all that Reg was adamant, and that argument would be fruitless. Mignonette was stunned, and made a soundless "Oh!" Charles tried not to laugh. It was hardly wholesome family conversation; no other man he knew would dream of making such an announcement, and in such a serious tone, too. It boarded on the bizarre. However, for the sake of peace and quiet, Charles decided to inject a note of support for his cousin. "I think it an excellent suggestion. As you say, your wedding day is not far off ... Quite sensible, really."

Anne simply stood open-mouthed, staring at her brother, who was nodding wisely at Charles's reading of the state of affairs. Ingrid bit her lip. What a toot Reg was!

Whatever Ingrid and Charles got up to was their private affair. They had not spoken about marriage. For Anne, there was nothing. If Anne cried into her pillow, she told no-one. Let Reg wear his heart on his sleeve; Anne's emotions must and would be hidden from public view.

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END OF CHAPTER XIV

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER XV

"Ooooooh! Well done, darling girl! That's the most *gorgeous* ring, Barb! You lucky duck ..."

A group of nurses crowded around Nurse Barbara Benson as she flashed her magnificent sapphire engagement ring to all and sundry. Her fond fiancé, Michael Longvey, stood beside her, smiling worshipfully at his rather mercenary young future wife. In the background, a small band provided some dance music. The place was crowded with a jolly group of ebullient well-wishers.

Barbara's engagement party was being held in the first floor of Mrs Greenway's hotel, "The Shepherd's Lament". The ladies (who normally wore stiffly-starched uniforms as they went about their work at St Maude's) had now put on their evening finery in order to properly celebrate Nurse Benson's betrothal. In the nature of things, a troop of unattached young men had somehow drifted into their ken, perhaps doggedly following the scent of Eau de Cologne or Lily of the Valley. So, it turned out to be quite a party.

Anne wandered about, happily greeting her friends and their partners. She was in her best looks, even if the tantalizing frock she wore was of her own creation. Laughing and chatting, drinking a gin and vermouth, Anne was stunning. Thus, it comes as no surprise that several chaps might have been very affected by her beauty. One of these blokes was currently deep in conversation with Captain

Arthur Beauchamps, who had inadvertently found himself at this particular pub on this particular evening.

"I say! What a corker! Look at that dreamboat, Beau. Glorious hour-glass figure, what! Can't **bear** to see her on her own like this. I mean, she could be molested by some wolf or peanut or whatever. I'll go to her ... spot of protection ... excuse me, won't you?"

At that juncture, Arthur stopped as if shot, staring at Anne in complete bewilderment. While her newly-met gallant chatted her up, Anne glanced in Arthur's direction. With immense willpower, Anne got over the awkwardness of seeing her love again by waving and smiling in a most winsome way, as if she could not have cared less. Then she pretended a huge interest in the lustful fellow who had providentially taken her hand. Moving away to dance with the Unknown, Anne pretended to enjoy the foxtrot. However, her partner was simply obnoxious: his remarks on her natural attributes were most inappropriate. Thus, when she could, Anne escaped in good order to the Ladies' powder room. Staring at her face in the mirror, Anne determined that her tears over Elwyd had been shed for the very last time. She would not cry. She would not ...

Leaving the powder room, Anne tried to find somebody decent to connect up with, as a means to avoid any further embarrassment. But Arthur had been watching for her.

"Nurse Thorrock. May I have this dance, please?"

"Of course, Arthur. I should like that. How are you keeping?"

Arthur, like Anne, had decided to try and start again. "I'll be all the better to have you in my arms, sweetheart."

They were well-suited to each other, and both thoroughly enjoyed the close contact required when dancing on the busy floor. Arthur took the chance to kiss his partner, right on the lips. Anne smiled

deliciously. "That kiss was by way of apology," Arthur whispered. "I behaved like a stiff-rumped martinet when I first met you. And I'm truly sorry for that, Anne. Can you ever forgive me?"

The evening was superb, for both Miss Thorrock and Captain Beauchamps. They danced, chatted, laughed happily, drank intoxicating liquor, and kissed. They were in love. Arthur cupped the girl's jaw in his hands many times, overcome with his adoration for this unbelievable female, sister of one of his best friends.

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As it turned out, however, it was to be this best friend who put a huge spanner in the works, just as Arthur was working himself up to asking Reg for Anne's hand in marriage.

"Arthur! Good! Can you make it on Saturday morning? Or Sunday even? No ... better make it the weekend after ... Just remembered that we're all decamping to the Steers-Barclay barracks for more ruddy cricket. Brigid ... or ... I don't remember her name ... apparently, she's keen to have a bat on behalf of the Ladies. Quite a dashing little thing, she is. M'cousin Charles worships her ... Anyhow, does that suit you?" asked Reg, slapping his former Army buddy on the upper arm in a friendly, matey manner.

"Let's do this properly, shall we, Thorrock? Invite me into your den, right now, where we'll crack open a bottle of your finest whiskey, whilst I lay before you my prospects, with a view to marrying your sister. I shall promise with all my heart to work at making her contented, and you'll nod in a fatherly manner at my declaration that your permission will make me the happiest of men." At this juncture, Arthur raised his eyebrows, and nodded encouragingly.

However, Reg was indifferent to all that. "Yes, yes ... fine. But Arthur, we'll need to wise you up on what's been happening so far. It's getting very grim, I'm afraid, with --." The complete absence of tact was understandable: Reg had only one thing on his mind, after all.

"What are you talking about, Old Boy?"

Just then, Charles and Nettie returned, somewhat breathless, from their tennis game at Mr Simpkin's court. (Mr Simpkin wanted the young ones to enjoy themselves. Quite a change for him ... prior to the Anglo-German hostilities, he had been dead against allowing the neighbourhood to sully his court.) Anyhow, they were dressed appropriately, and carried aged racquettes and dirty white balls. The lady's voice was raised in her version of anger. "You didn't take that shot, Cuz-to-be. I'm telling you honestly that it was at least two inches out!"

The pair clomped inside, through the open front door.

"Oh, hello, dear Arthur! Have you come to book an appointment on the devil bed? Such fun!" Mignonette swanned up to Arthur, standing on tiptoe such that she could kiss his cheek. "How dashing you look in your uniform! No wonder Anne is head-over-heels in love with you. But of course, Elwyd is such a very hero of romance, isn't he?"

Oblivious to Arthur's tight-lipped silence, Reg watched his affianced fondly. As she went up onto tip-toe again, kissing Reg on the lips, he asked: "How was your game? Who won?"

"Charles *didn't* win, though of course he'll tell you that he was the glorious victor. It's all rot." Nettie had wafted off to the kitchen for a drink.

Charles, smiling broadly, came towards Arthur, hand extended. As he took Arthur's hand strongly in his, Thorrock called to his cousin's fiancée: "It was in. You need your eyes tested, Lassie." With a suitable change of tone, he addressed Beauchamps warmly. "Captain B, how are you? Sorry that I was such a gudgeon when we last met. I can only blame it on past life intruding on the present. Something like that. Er ... nice to meet you again."

Arthur shook hands as best he could. He tried to get out some kind of acknowledgement for the welcome, but could only come up with "Thorrock".

There was an awkward silence, broken when Mignonette returned to the men, bearing a glass of water for Charles and one for herself. "The Saxons are rather fun. At least I am. It's all singing and dancing and riding about on a variety of horseflesh."

"And not worrying about electricity black-outs or the price of fish," laughed Charles.

"And the bed isn't all that bad, really. Of course, I woke up several times to find Reggie stroking my arm with a lovelorn look on his phiz, which I found altogether too enchanting."

Reg roared with laughter. "I promise faithfully that I won't stroke *you*, Old Boy! But it certainly will be jolly wonderful to get hold of the next (and possibly last) instalment of the drama."

There was another lull. It now hit Charles full-face that Arthur was eager to get away; that (in actual fact) the idea of the proposed sojourn to the devil bed was anethma to him.

However, Reg soldiered on unthinkingly: "Look, Beau, you wanted to see me in my den? About Anne? Come on then ... Whiskey at the double!"

Captain Beauchamps pulled himself together and pretended to look anxiously at his watch. Excusing himself ("Good God! Is that the time?"), he shook hands with the three friends and tore off.

Reg and Mignonette stared and wondered, swapping ideas on what could be the base cause of Arthur Beauchamps's unexpected behaviour. Charles knew. They had managed to repulse Arthur again. The Captain would not be lying on the devil bed; his part in the amazing story would not be told. Thorrock could not hide his bitter disappointment.

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Beauchamps stayed away as long as he could. When his actual work at the Foreign Department began to suffer through his unrequited longing for Reg Thorrock's sister, he took matters in hand. On a late-Summer Sunday afternoon, Arthur motored over to Danube Square. This was it!

Just as Arthur alighted from his automobile, Reg Thorrock's party of five were descending the short flight of steps at the front of Reg's house. The three ladies looked very fetching in their floral, cotton frocks and flower-trimmed hats.

After the welcomes and introductions to Ingrid, Reg persuaded Arthur to accompany them to Evensong. "I know it must sound balmy to you, Beau, but we're finding a great deal of restfulness in joining with our local Vicar for the weekly evening service. Don't know if this fixation will survive into Autumn. Probably not! But here we are."

Beauchamps maintained his balance. "Of course, Reg. I'd love to join you."

The leisurely stroll to St Bart's found Arthur and Anne walking well behind the others. But the conversation did not ever get beyond the commonplace. Reg, ever trampling good intentions underfoot, blurted out, as the men took a last cigarette prior to entering the church, that Ingrid had been spending an inordinate amount of time researching at the Library, on the subject of the New Forest.

"She's taking an interest in Aborigines, then?" asked Arthur, misunderstanding.

"Oh, no. It's all to do with the Saxons of Wessex and their eventual subjugation of the Jutes who'd propped in the New Forest. Mention of genocide, which is less than invigorating ...However, jolly intriguing, what? You'll have to get her to tell you about --"

Charles jumped in. "Sorry, Cuz, but we'd better make a move. I can hear the organ ramping-up. Don't want to miss the first hymn. Might be one of your favourites." As Charles shepherded his cousin into the pew, he stole a glance at Anne's lover. The man wore a rigid, stolid face, as he sat beside Anne.

There was now little chance of bringing Beauchamps around, Charles realized, as he gritted his teeth, despairingly. Their bloody ancient saga would be like the Unfinished Symphony ...

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Following the service, their walk along the river in the silky twilight was delicious. Ingrid and Charles strode out, stopping every so often under a fall of willow branches to stare into the river. Charles more often than not stood behind his lady, with arms folded about her neck. They were both intricate characters, clearly well-matched. Their whispered conversations and laughter were meant for themselves alone. Reg and Mignonette, however, proved to be more formal lovers, even despite Reg's earlier demands of his soul-mate. They walked hand-in-hand at a sensible pace.

Anne and Arthur strolled along, both miserable, at least two feet apart. They allowed the others to outpace them.

"When I saw you at the Shepherd's Hay or whatever it's called, I wanted to ... But you know as well as I do, Anne, it just won't work."

Anne took a deep breath, trying to make herself sound confident and in control. Trying for normality. "Quite right. However, if you ever want a dance-partner ..."

Arthur stopped to light a cigarette. He chuckled the match away as if he was angry, discomposed. Dragging smoke into his lungs, he turned to the girl, who was still unsure whether they would be walking on or not. The steely look in the man's eyes at that moment was the look he wore when summoning his troops into battle.

"I say, Anne. I'm a square fellow who tells it as it is. No nonsense, no persiflage, no frills ... that's me. So, alright, I'll tell you how it stands in plain, bald English. I think that you're a smashing girl. I cannot think of any girl on this Earth that I could possibly want to spend the rest of my life with other than you. That's a fact. If I don't tie-up with you, then I'll be a bachelor all my life. That's an absolute

certainty. I fell in love with you from the moment you opened the door to me on that fateful night. But I can't and won't come to grips with this ridiculous Anglo-Saxon rubbish that has enveloped you all. It's too appalling for words. No, Anne! There's no excuse ... you should just hear yourselves talk. All five of you. It's ...it's repellant. And I won't be a part of it."

Here, the young man took another drag on his smoke, looking at the river as if nothing else mattered.

Trying for a light tone, despite feeling as if she'd been hit with a cricket bat in the guts, Anne chuckled. "Reg is planning to get you into that bed, fair means or foul."

Grimly, Arthur murmured: "I'll just bet he is."

"We thought of drugging you, and then placing you in it. Not very sensible, is it? That's the problem, you see. It makes you go so potty that you can't hear reason any more."

There was a long silence. Beauchamps was deep in thought.

"What will you do?" he asked, at length.

"I've told everyone that I'll devote my life to nursing. I shall be a latter-day Florence Nightingale. In the long run, it will probably be best if I leave England. I might emigrate to New Zealand or Canada. I don't really know. Nurses are in demand all over the world, you see."

"Start a new life?"

The girl nodded sadly.

"You'll find someone else, and marry him. You're an extraordinarily pretty girl, Anne."

The girl's head drooped, as she shook it. "No I won't," she whispered. "I can never love again."

"Come on," the man coaxed, half-heartedly. "It was only a dream. You'll forget."

Again, Anne shook her bowed head.

"You really believe this stuff, don't you? That it actually, truly happened? That human beings whose lives were extinguished over 1,300 years ago should suddenly be resurrected in 1945? Everything neatly dovetailed and meshed so perfectly that all the players find true romance? I'm very much afraid that that is flying-pigs material, Anne. I thought you had more sense than that."

The lost pair heard Reg call to them to get a wriggle-on. Arthur touched Anne's shoulder, then marched forward, leaving Anne to trudge on sadly in his wake. Now he was insulting her, and it just wasn't her fault. The other four had deliberately chosen to revisit the past: but for Anne, going back had been purely accidental.

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Charles and Ingrid headed off in Charles's car. Then Reg offered to drive Mignonette home. This was all devised in order to leave the unhappy pair alone, to settle things one way or the other. After a brief but painful discussion, "other" won out.

The man stood. He was angry that this silly nonsense had so taken in his friend and all the Thorrock family. He was tired, too. All he yearned for was a good night's sleep. To Hell with Reg and his kin! What an enormous fool he would become, if he hitched himself to this crowd!

"Well, goodnight, Anne. Sorry we didn't gel. I ... I'm truly sorry. But, as I said, you'll never want for suitors with your ... your ... 'Bye.'"

The girl was too busy sobbing to do more than whimper. Captain Beauchamps was solid in his stance. He had not the slightest intention of giving-in, however pathetic and appealing Miss Thorrock might be. Such a suggestion (as that which had risen in his brain, that he should take the beauty in his arms to comfort her) was too preposterous for words. As he left the house, raking his fingers through his hair, Captain Beauchamps grabbed his Army cap from the hall table. His strong jaw was square, rigid. The opening of the door caused a draft of cool air to fan his face. Good! Put a damper on the bloody emotion, thought the young officer. He trotted down the short flight of steps, looking up at the sky. Then he strode along the neat pathway, frowning deeply.

All unexpectedly, from Beauchamps's left, a huge horse, as big as any milkman's carthorse, cleared the hedge. The rider of this massive horse was a large man in a hooded cape, who bore his round black shield strapped on his right forearm. Arthur stood, shocked, hearing a mirthless roar of laughter emanating from the unknown warrior. It was the black shield which the rider used to dash against the side of Beauchamps's head, felling him where he stood, not two yards from Reg's front gate.

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When the officer awoke, hours later, all he knew was that his head ached sickeningly. Through his soupy vision, he could just make out Reg's face hovering over him. Reg was calling his name. And someone else was trying to revive him with evil-smelling salts. He pushed the hand away. Then, Arthur understood, because he heard a familiar female voice. Anne was a nurse. Anne was in control. There was nothing to worry about.

Beauchamps managed to say: "I'm doing quite well, Old Fellow. Rocky, don't you worry about me ..."

"Arty! Beau! Did somebody jump you? We've been out of our wits with ... Look, Old Bean, I hope you don't mind, and all that, but I took it upon myself to check out your wallet. Did you have about 90 quid on you? Was that your stash, or are you by any chance now missing a bankroll?"

This was going to be extremely difficult ... best play along ... "Er ... No ... No, £90 is about right. But let me see if anything else is missing, Reg."

Beauchamps was in a great deal of pain. Of course, being from the Old School, he would never let on. Indeed, it was only his teetering stance that gave the game away. And both Reg and Anne supported him as he gingerly ferreted through his pockets. That was a touch embarrassing: "What do we have here?" muttered Captain Beauchamps, giving a weak chuckle. "This is funny, isn't it?" he asked Anne. "First, you faint, and I carry you to the couch. And then I pass out, and wind up in the same place. You didn't carry me here, by any chance, did you?"

"I hardly think so. I'm pretty fit, but not yet an Olympic weight-lifter. Arthur: you really need to rest. I'm treating you for severe concussion."

"I only want to stand so that I may clear Reg's mind about a possible theft. No, I'm not missing any possessions. Watch, ring, money. No, nothing stolen, thank God." Arthur was only too glad to resume his seat on the couch. That bizarre cloaked fellow had given him one hell of a bang on the mazard.

Reg was confused. "Then who the Devil whacked you, and why? if not to steal from you."

It was not Captain Beauchamps's intention to lie to these good people; but needs must ... Arthur muttered about a madman perhaps. Or a case of mistaken identity. He turned to Anne and grinned. "You should have taken advantage of my incapacity and given me a whirl on that hateful bed of yours."

"Not to be thought of," Reg waffled on. "At any road, I very nearly tripped up over you as I came through the front gate. Scared the living daylights out of me. For there you were, in your uniform, apparently lifeless in my front yard. I raced inside, woke Anne and had her help me to lug you inside the house. No time nor inclination to stow you in the spare room. None at all."

"Well, thank you both for your assistance. Judging by the clock, and recalling the time when I left here ... my guess is that I've been out for over 3 hours. So that blighter stunned me with a pretty hard knock, it would seem." Anne, brisk and business-like was in her organizer mode. This chitchat was simply ignored.

"Reg, drag the spare mattress into this room. You can't sleep on the couch, you know that. And Captain Beauchamps must have your bed. He mustn't attempt to move far with that concussion."

For once, Reg was in total agreement with the general flow of activity, and roundly expressed his pleasure at the turn of events.

Brother and sister would have nothing of their visitor's protests: "Of course Reg mustn't give up his bed for me. This is nonsense. And besides, won't the mattress itself be spooked?"

"Not at all. It's only the *frame* of the bed which causes all this trouble. We'll all be as right as trivets, you'll see."

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Ten days later, Nurse Thorrock was just about to retire for the night, when one of the other girls poked her head around the doorway. "Chap downstairs for you, Anne. Better hurry: lights out in 20."

"Oh ... Rightio!" The girl slung some clothes on sketchily, imagining that Charles awaited her in the dimly-lit lobby. She left her hair exactly as it was, dangling down her back in its long, thick plait. Charles wouldn't mind a bit what she looked like. Anne dashed downstairs, only to pull up short, very surprised, to find Arthur standing at the foot of the dormitory stairs. The other girl had followed Anne. This chappie must have pulled some pretty serious strings to get this far into No Man's Land. Anne reached the Captain's side, noting how tired, drawn and worried he looked.

"Arthur!"

"Hello, Anne."

"Arthur, I can't stay very long. We have a strict curfew here, you know."

"Yes, I guessed that. Look, I want to ask you to forgive me. And I do want to marry you ... more than ever ... if you aren't completely fed-up with me ... I'll sleep in that bed. **Now**, if you want me to."

This drew a shocked gasp from the nurse still stationed on the stairs, in her adopted role of gooseberry. Anne glanced at the other female, then back at Arthur, unable to grasp what seemed to be marching forward. "But why the sudden change of heart? What's happened to --"

"I just can't stand it any more, Darling. That's the simple truth of the matter. Not having you in my arms is bad enough. But, all the rest ... it's pretty gruesome, I have to say."

Just as the chaperone framed the words: "Well, goodnight, Sir. Thank you for calling, but Nurse Thorrock really must return to her room now," Anne tried to find out the cause of Arthur's distress. He stopped Anne's mouth by kissing her. It was a hard kiss. He was hugging the girl much too tightly; he was holding nothing back. Intervention was positively required. And Nurse Windermere was more than up for it!

When Anne could speak, she gasped: "Gussie ... might I have a few moments alone with the Captain, do you suppose?"

"You can't go kissing blokes here, of all places, Anne. They'll throw you out," came the urgent whisper.

"We're very sorry. Just give us a couple of minutes, won't you? We promise not to smooch," grinned Arthur. The chaperone took the hint (the officer's voice contained just that note of authority and command), flouncing back up the stairs to await Anne outside her room.

Arthur could not have cared less about dormitory regulations just now. The girl he loved was snuggled in his arms, so close to him that he could rest his chin on the top of her head, on her soft brown hair. Whatever they'd promised Augusta Windermere, a few more moments of affection would not go amiss ...

Sitting side-by-side in the gloom, Arthur grabbed the girl's hands in his. "Quick. I've such a lot to tell you. Those people. Those folk from the Old Times whom you've all been dreaming about. They're tormenting me. Daily now. It's become much more frequent."

Anne could not disguise her shock: "**What?**"

"Just today, I was heading for Major Tonkin's office, when your cousin rushed toward me. He was dressed à la Saxon, carrying a spear and buckler. Charles literally pushed me out of the way, in the manner of protecting me from something. Just as well he did, I suppose. For then, I felt the blade of a large, menacing sword swoosh by us, just shaving our heads. It only lasted an instant, a split second."

"But ..." Anne was lost for words.

"Quick as lightning, I jumped to my feet. A couple of chappies nearby laughed at me. You know ... telling me to 'Mind your step, Beau', as if I'd simply tripped. No mention of Charles, or of the mystery swordsman, which they naturally would have done if they'd seen them. I'm not being very clear, am I?"

Anne was enthralled. "You say that my cousin sprang out of nowhere, bringing you to ground, just in time to save you from slaughter. Then instantly he was gone?"

The Captain took a long breath. "So, I just pretended to laugh it off. But when I squatted down to retrieve my folder and pen, there were samples of mine and Thorrock's hair lying about. And if you

look here, you can see where some of my hair is missing." Charles pointed vaguely towards the right side of his head. "I should imagine that Thorrock has a bit of a bald patch, too."

"But, Arthur, that's just impossible!"

"No more impossible than you and I having a wedding night together before we'd actually met."

That was a step too far. Anne blushed fiercely, under Beauchamps's seering gaze.

"And similar things like that are occurring every day. I didn't mean to tell you; only, it's so weird, and is so evidently part of this bed business. Do you remember a couple of weeks ago when Reg found me, stunned on his pathway? That was no street thug who attacked me, Anne. It was a hooded man on an enormous steed. I found out later on in these crazy visions that his name is Glenowan. It seems that his life's work is to eradicate your's truly."

Anne's hand now clamped themselves over her mouth, her eyes wide with appalled realization.

Beauchamps nodded. "Yes. It was probably he on the phantom steed (Glenowan, that is) and at work yesterday, lustily wielding his sword. So, I want to apologize for having being such an ass since I met you. I truly am sorry for thinking of you and your family as nutters. I'm now by far the loopest of our little group." This brought a chuckle from the girl.

Once again holding Anne's hands, Arthur continued. "I now mean to try out the haunted bed, if I may, with your permission, before this Glenowan fellow finishes me off."

"Darling, you have to allow a full day. A Sunday morning is the best time, we've found."

"Right!" confirmed the Captain. "Then Sunday morning it shall be."

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END OF CHAPTER XV

WONDERLINGS

CHAPTER XVI

Death hung about the Jutes in dark grey palls. Glenowan laughed at the wonderlings, as his immense horse sidled and fidgeted under him. He was not a real man ... one only had to look at the ghostly, pallid cheeks and listless eyes to know that he was from the underworld. Yet he taunted them, he and the grey Vegas; taunted with gesture and look.

"Murdo, Murdo, why did you leave us?" whispered Hoggard. Each man (and Reece, too) was armed for war. The foe was all but unbeatable, and the men knew that. Haewan passed the rune stone and the pledges to Wilt for safe-keeping, and bade the boy hide himself amongst yonder rocks.

"I want to fight!" the boy said, boldly.

"You may not," came the swift reply. "Somebody has to mind the horses, the dogs and the women. That will be you, young Wilt, in the worst case."

Elwyd shouted: "We only have to unseat this knave. He cannot survive if knocked from his horse."

"Come on then, men!" roared Shelf. "Get Glenowan to sit on his bum on the cold hard ground."

Glenowan laughed again at that, and summoned his sides to him, by brandishing his sword on high. Clouds of poisonous vapours which rose from about the rider formed themselves into shapes. Writhing monsters curled and twined about each other, slaving and spitting venom over the wonderlings. Rather than run for cover, however, the Jutish folk agreed there and then that they would fight on, bringing out every trick and ruse they knew.

Into the fray flew the six wonderlings. They slashed at Glenowan, with sword, with spear, with stout stick. But they were worsted at every stroke, either by the rider, or by one of his ghoulish sides. Shelf, fighting manfully to the end, was snatched up from behind by a male fire-breathing dragon as he attempted to slaughter its mate. Haewan, even though he was a flesh-hacker by trade, howled in terror to see his boyhood friend's lifeblood spilling from the evil jaws down onto his upturned face. Then, within the winking of a tear-filled eye, the dragon's she-mate gouged Haewan's flesh. But he did not immediately die; not before he had plunged his sword deep within the monster's brain, killing her, as he himself passed from life.

Glenowan raised his black shield and his sword, summoning this panoply of ghouls, ghosts, macabre mummies, cackling demons and all manner of horrors. The wonderlings watched in terror as the ghastly crowd (shrieking and screaming) circled above Glenowan. They must soon strike! Death could not be long in coming.

Elwyd shouted again: "We must unseat Glenowan! He will surely die if we can knock him from his horse."

Derrie had hardly a breath left in his wracked body. "That cannot be done! Horse and rider are as one. As soon tell the Sun not to rise."

Rainard yelled out that Reece must not continue to war against the horrors. She and Wilt were to hide behind a large rock, with the Queen. Hoggard was nearby, fiercely brandishing his sword. "Let the horse throw him then, all unexpectedly. How can that be done, now?"

Wilt hit on the solution in a trice. "Reece! Hoggard! Murdo told me something that we might be able to use. The horse Vegas cannot let his hooves touch water. He can fly, he can gallop ... but his hooves must not touch water. He is never to be seen in rain or storm, but waits until bad weather becomes fine. And he clears rivers, streams, puddles -- all without getting a drop of water on his magical hooves."

Hoggard came up close to Wilt, shouting: "What do you say, boy? Must we push the steed into the brook ... is that what you say?"

Wilt violently shook his head before Hoggard had even finished asking his question. "No, no! He will jump or fly over water. It is impossible to get him *into* the water." The roaring of dragon, monster and man continued. Hoggard and Reece frowned at each other. As Reece began to ask Wilt for more information, Wilt screamed: "The dogs! Wet dogs could nuzzle up to his legs. We could distract Glenowan --"

"Go then, boy, and dunk the hounds!" shouted Cempa.

Wilt had quite a time of it. The dogs insisted on joining the fight and might not have come away to do the boy's bidding. However, Wilt's urgent calling was enough. "Tag! Brach! Burr! Docga!" He soon had the dogs in the brook, where they rolled and drank. "What must I say to you foul hounds, then, to make you press your muddy sides against the hooves of Vegas? Go dogs! Go!"

Wilt watched in anxious awe as (somehow) the dogs knew what they were to do. Whilst Glenowan and Vegas were busy defending themselves from the renewed attacks of the Jutes, the four manky dogs all managed to rub their dank bodies up against the huge hooves of the magical horse. The dogs had to keep their wits about them: instantly, on feeling the wetness on its feet, the horse buckjumped and lashed out with terrifying ferocity. So outraged was this huge animal, that he happily tossed off his rider. The mighty Glenowan, on hitting the ground, expired without giving a moment's pause. The horse showed no remorse. He whinnied and pored the ground angrily, without heed to what damage his weight might cause in trampling the body of the former master. At that

same moment, bowing in awe to the wonderlings, the haints, ghosts, dragons and other spectral beasts subsided, re-entering their feotid portals in the ground.

Vegas stood guard over Glenowan's withered corpse, his four hooves stretched over his former master. Snorting, tossing his head, and lashing-out at the snarling dogs, Vegas would not permit anyone to approach. On and on, the dogs worried the gigantic beast. To no avail; he was immovable.

Rainard longed for one thing only: to savagely thrust his sword again and again into the rotted guts of what had once been the ghost warrior, the mighty Glenowan. The others, aghast at their terror of moments before, looked about miserably at the slaughter-sorrow.

"Cempa, Cempa!" shrieked Reece.

But Cempa was no more. The Jutes had lost three of their men. Rainard had sustained a very nasty wound to his right leg. The others were sore and beaten, lustily dragging air into their lungs after the rigours of the fight. The lovely Queen emerged from her hiding place, touching each of her warriors on the shoulder, giving them comfort.

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On a rock, Cempa's body lay on its spine, with its members draped negligently about. A large welt of blood seeped from under his old leather jerkin. Hoggard and Derrie had finished creating the litter which would bear Cempa's earthly remains back to rejoin the Hill Folk. Queen Netta-Vere cried only a little as she trilled her sad, sweet song of farewell. This she did as she strewed fresh greenery about, upon which the corpse would lie. Hoggard and Elwyd bore the carcass to the litter, arranging the limbs as they set it down thereon. Then it was covered with larger green branches.

"He is at peace," said the Queen.

Reece had bravely supported Rainard to the brook, where clear, icy water tumbled over and over itself in a mad cascade. The man groaned as he was eased down beside the babbling water, such that Reece could wash his wounds. At least, he lived.

Shelf's corpse was so mangled that instant burial seemed the wisest decision. Likewise, Haewan's hacked body could not be taken back to his tribe without causing immense grief among his friends. Derrie and Hoggard dug small graves. The assembled party put coloured stones and flowers on the makeshift burial plots. The aftermath of death was a time of reverence for the Jutes, crammed with prescribed customs and folklore. They farewelled Shelf and Haewan as best they could, then turned to wander back to their homes.

Hunger seered their stomachs, chests and throats. Reece caught two squirrels, while Rainard speared a large fish, as he sat by the brook, ruminating on his fate. Queen Netta-Vere, ever dancing about, came upon a small grove of walnut trees. Our brave adventurers made themselves a shelter in the usual manner, then a fire. They cooked the squirrels and fish, while gorging themselves on walnuts. They obtained the fruit through the kind offices of Rainard, who was too much hurt to assist with the erection of the shelter, choosing instead to pound the walnuts between two flattish stones.

"We cannot tramp home on just this meagre supper," moaned Derrie. Since losing Cempa, Derrie had lost all of his sparkle.

However, the little Queen was not to have anyone cast-down in her entourage. Indeed, she seemed to have sprung a new life-force following Glenowan's demise. "Tomorrow, my dearest little athelings, you shall eat and drink your fill. At first light, all our sadness and loss will be turned on their heads. You'll see."

Nettie's jubilation was met with deep-furrowed frowns by all. She danced about, singing to herself as was her way. Even watching her was tiring, Reece decided. Their collective stomachs were still empty. Rainard's mood was foul, owing to his hunger and the pain in his leg. He and Elwyd began a

shouting-match over some trivial little thing. It would not be long before punches were thrown, Hoggard surmised, if the prominent veins showing in both men's necks were anything to go by. And those who went in to separate the men received an earful of Cock Barn insults for their trouble. Fynne's husband and Fynne's brother did not speak to each other for some time.

Finally, as they tried unsuccessfully to sleep, Elwyd rose quickly and slammed out of the rough shelter, almost bringing it down on the occupants. Derrie, Reece, Hoggard and Wilt quietly arose to watch Elwyd bang the three gold pins which had been in Cempa's care into a walnut sapling. He used a rock to achieve this. Elwyd, feeling somewhat shamefaced, explained his action: "No-one will find them here. No-one will ever look for them here. And not having to touch them again will ease my heavy heart. I'm sorry for you Reece, and for Queenie. And for Fynne ... for I'd thought to give them out. But they are wicked. Glenowan bewitched those pins. They will do better to be out of our hands."

Elwyd wiped his hands down his legs. There was a moment, in that moonlit walnut grove, that reminded them all of how far they had come, and what terrors they had beaten. The wonderlings were going home.

Reece turned on her heel and marched smartly to the shelter. She found Rainard lying on his side, looking glum. He looked up into the girl's face.

"I have more bracken potion to rub into your wound. Now would be a good time, before you fall asleep."

As she applied the potion to Rainard's ravaged leg, the man hissed with pain.

"I shall come to your Dale, Rainard, and shall look after you."

"And be my wife, I suppose."

"Yes."

"And Queen Netta-Vere? You swore to care for her, too."

"No, Rainard. Wilt and your brother will stay with Netta-Vere in the Near Treeland. Hoggard will come to love her, given time and several babies. So, your Wulfes loses a man and gains a woman. He must be happy with that outcome." Here, the girl nodded, with finality.

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"In the morning, the sun shone down on our little party. I longed to see my lovely Fynne once more, and to bury my half-brother with due solemnity. We all stood in a ring, as usual, with right hand extended into the centre of the circle. Then Derrie cheered-up enough to tell the tale. Rainard rode the grey swayback, Reece her furry pony, myself on my father's black stallion, Derrie the roan pony and Wilt his little brown pony. The litter bearing Cempa was hitched up to the big, lumbering horse which had been provided by the Mere Folk. Hoggard led this animal, as his charge Queen Netta-Vere sat neatly on its broad back."

Here, Arthur took a sip of his beer. The Thorrock family and friends had carried some light furniture outside. The devil bed was also out in the yard, in bits. It would suffer the worst fate of all. But not today. Arthur's captivated audience sat about in pairs. Nettie leant against Reg, on a battered sofa, weeping into a lace handkerchief. Reg had absently slung an arm about his beloved. Charles sat in an old cane chair, with Ingrid on his knees and in his arms. Ingrid managed to contain her tears ... but only just. Arthur was perched on a long, low wooden bench, with Anne beside him. That lady's tears flowed freely.

Charles asked: "Did we ever make up?"

Beauchamps laughed. "Of course. We shook hands and hugged each other. You called me 'brother-friend', and commented that my body was hard from warfare, and that my spear arm was strong. And I repaid the compliment by calling you my 'hearty tree-trunk brother, with iron sword of right.'"

Charles pulled a face. "Oh, stop it! You're making me ill!"

Anne brightened. "At least you were happy again, after all the misery."

"Well, that all hung on Nettie being correct about the bounty we would discover as we wended our way home. The wonderlings were so very hungry, you see. The dogs, who'd already saved us from Glenowan, brought down two lambs on a bleak, wind-swept, rocky hillside. We allowed the dogs to share their meal with us. Actually, it was like an old fashioned camp fire, with meat roasting on hot coals. I can't tell you how delicious that meal of fresh lamb was, even if we didn't hang it long enough. We were so starving that we didn't care.

"All sorts of serendipitous events followed: Seaxneat drawing me off to a quiet glade to reassure me that now all would be well, getting some work to barter for food and lodging, finding an old soak in a lean-to, supposedly making ale ... We scarpered with a butt of his fine ale, getting ourselves horribly drunk into the bargain."

"Me too?" trilled Miss Steers-Barclay.

"You were like a puppy: all bounce and go until you dropped off to sleep in a snap. Poor Hoggard had to lug you about, so sound asleep you were. And he himself not so sure-footed on his drunk old pins."

Mignonette chucked her beloved in the chin. "Oh, dear Reggie simply loves to tote me about. Other than cricket, it's his favourite hobby."

Reg smiled. "But tell me, Beau ... those pins. (Not my legs, of course ... I mean the costume thingummies.) You say that you banged them into the wood of a walnut sapling?"

"Yes."

Ingrid, cosily nestled on her beloved's lap, spoke up. "You were going to give those pins to us, though, weren't you? To me and to Nettie ... and to Fynne."

"You can have them now, in 1945, when we burn that bed. That is, if my theory proves correct." Arthur looked at the malignant bed with some disgust. "You know, I'm glad we're burning it. If not to get at the pins, at least to rid ourselves of it horrors."

"Agreed wholeheartedly," commented Charles.

"But Arthur ... do tell me now, did you go back to the Hill Folk and resume your life with Fynne?" Ingrid asked. She and Anne shared a smile.

"Oh, yes. Matter of fact, my beloved young wife was picking flowers when we first came into view. By then, Wilt, Nettie and Hoggard had left us, to join up with the Near Treeland folk. So, I shouted out your name, Anne, and you ran to me, with your silky hair streaming down your back. No need to tell you how happy I was with that!"

In front of all these people, and completely out of character, Arthur gave Anne a very loving kiss. He stroked her hair reverently. They stared at each other, until Arthur recalled himself.

"Where was I?" Arthur took another swig of beer. "So ... by my reckoning, that walnut sapling into which I banged the decorative pins grew to be a sizable tree. And the tree was felled, the timber dressed, and used for some item of furniture, perhaps, or even as a utilitarian piece of equipment. Down, down, down through the centuries, that timber was shifted on, until some bright spark bethought him of creating a bed. I don't know; I'm simply guessing ... The owners of the bed suffered

the nightmares, realized that the wood was somehow involved, and sold or passed it on. That we **do** know from Reg's mate, Rowntree."

Reg nodded, and mused: "Do you know, I really ought to wizz over to Glossop. Rowntree gave us a damned fine bit of assistance, he did. Perhaps take him a nice tin of those chocolate-covered biscuits from Yorkshire. The ones with the coloured foil on them. Tell him how it all panned out."

"Smashing, darling! However ... Could it possibly be that the bed was **meant** to end up with my Reggie? Is that what you're thinking, Arthur ...That it was somehow fated?" asked Nettie.

"Something like that ... The three pins together spelled 'nightmare'. But each single pin is simply a work of art with no side effects. Thus, my suggestion, in short, is that we should burn the bed and extract the three gold pins. That's the only way, seems to me. One pin each for you ladies, to keep them apart. Settled?"

Everyone signified assent.

"Good as done!"

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Reg wore a short-sleeved shirt, Charles stripped off his polo neck shirt, wearing only his singlet. Arthur, in uniform, peeled off his Army jacket and rolled up his sleeves. Each man was equipped with an axe, sharpened through Charles's good offices. Without wasting any more time, the three men broke up the bed. Then, they took all of the wooden parts of the bed, rhythmically chopped them into useful blocks, putting all the metal bits to one side. Reg made a fire on a piece of corrugated tin.

As the fire took hold of the kindling which Charles had provided, the larger pieces of what had once been a handsome bed were placed on the flames. Now the garden fire became quite a serious thing, radiating much heat. Reg poked the red-hot embers with an iron garden stake, Arthur with a poker.

Charles watched them, arms akimbo. At last, Reg started, shouting animatedly: "Yes! Here we go! Tongs here, Charles."

Obediently, and without a sign of reluctance, Charles Thorrock came to stand with Reg, noting the position of a gleaming gold object among the burning cinders. Gingerly, Charles extracted same with dexterous use of the fire-tongs. The large, ornamental pin was reverently laid aside on a rag. The three men continued their vigilance, with renewed endeavour.

Hardly any time at all passed before Arthur triumphantly brought a dirty rag to the kitchen, where the three ladies were happily baking biscuits. Proudly, Arthur cleared a space on the table, laying down the rag thereon. Amidst a squeal of protest from the admonishing young women, Arthur unwrapped the rag. Breathless, the ladies peered at the three gold pins which lay on the rag.

"We cleaned these up. They're the actual ornamental pins as described."

"No! You're joking, aren't you?"

Nettie was ecstatic, nodding furiously. "Cempa showed them to me. That's them, to the life!"

"What would they be? About four inches in length? Oh, Arthur! They're so exquisite."

"One each."

"Do you mean ... We *are* going to keep these? Honest injun?"

"Shouldn't they go to a museum?"

Just then, Reg and Charles entered the kitchen. "I own the bed, and they were part of the bed. So, my decision stands. One for each lady."

Ingrid grabbed the oven gloves so that she could safely remove the trays of jam-topped biscuits. These she transferred to cake coolers. Before they were even slightly cooled, the young men hoed-in. Ingrid tried slapping fingers; but to no avail. "I don't think that we should keep these pins. They must belong to the Nation, surely. Stop that, Reg!"

Arthur shook his head. "Here's what we'll do. The last surviving woman of you three will hold all three pins. Then, when she passes on, in her will, the pins will go to the British Museum. Does that sound fair?"

Charles, Arthur and Reg watched fondly as the ladies chattered away, busy bees in Reg's kitchen, sticking Cempa's three decorative pins onto different parts of the curtains as they baked biscuits.

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END OF CHAPTER XVI

WONDERLINGS

EPILOGUE

Anne passed away in 1995, following her last cancer episode. At her bedside stood her husband, children and grandchildren. The large contingent of Thorrocks waited in the waiting room, along with Lord Barclay's burgeoning brood. The passing of Lady Beauchamps was seen as a huge loss by the community which she had served so obligingly all these years, as well as by her adoring family.

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Arthur, now a very old man, stood in his loungeroom, staring up at Andre Harnel's charcoal sketch of the Jutish jewellery, allowing his tears to well-up in his eyes.

The media baron, Lord Barclay, helped himself to a whiskey, then wandered over to stand beside his friend. He himself had lost his beloved Nettie to a stroke a couple of years earlier. Her pin had been passed to Anne for safe-keeping.

Finally, The Right Honourable Arthur Beauchamps spoke. "I'll give you back Nettie's pin, and also Anne's. You can hand them over to Ingrid when you next see her. Then she'll have the set."

"You could have spoken to her at the funeral. I know she was very upset, but ..."

Arthur did not answer.

Reg took a big swig of the liquor. "Righto. Well, Ingrid mentioned to me that, if she's now going to hold all three pins, then she'd rather donate them to the State. I know a chappie at the Museum ... Thimblesomeone ... something like that ... Professor ... What I'll do is to stage-manage a hand-over with full press coverage."

"Yes, that'd be right up your alley." There was no malice behind Arthur's words: he merely stated a fact.

"No, I meant that the three of us would do it. Hand them over. You, me and Chas. Bring some finality to our adventure."

Arthur was crying. He did not care if Reg was surprised by this unmanly exhibition. He just didn't care.

"You know, Reg, I can still remember that fargang as if it really happened to me, as a young man. As if it was a genuine part of my life. As old age creeps further in, I'm remembering more and more of my youth. Quite clearly, as it happens. But the time I spent as a "wonderling" just seems to override everything else."

Reg finished his drink. His old, gnarled hand dropped onto Beau's shoulder. "It's just that hard to forget, isn't it, that one gives up trying."

The clock ticked. Several birds began to sing outside, in the garden.

"So, Beau, you've no problems with handing over the three pins to the Museum? And you'll come along to my little ceremony?"

"Of course."

Reg nodded. He patted the shoulder of his dear old Army friend. As he left Arthur's home, Reg fancied that he saw Queen Netta-Vere happily flitting about and singing in the rose garden. She was laughing, as she reached up to tenderly stroke the garden birds with her delicate finger.

The elderly media baron watched her, smiling, as tears gathered in the corner of each eye.

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FINIS

WONDERLINGS

FOOTNOTES

I am not the first person to try to avoid French-based words when writing about the Anglo-Saxons. If I found myself in novelist-mode, discussing a scene from days-of-yore, then I felt entitled to wax lyrical in modern English, regardless of the root source of the words.

However, it seemed unfair to ask Jutes who existed in 683 AD to frame sentences dotted with healthy Norman or French derivatives.

The best way to go in this situation is to read Saxon scripts, then decide on a better word or group of words for the French equivalent.

For instance, the made-up word **folk-clutch** was used instead of "village"; **flesh-hacker** instead of "butcher". Oh, and some of the wild-flowers gained new names at Netta-Vere's hands. For instance, yellow mustard was called "wisp". And I know (!!!) that geese are not "fowl". I know that. But I could not have my characters mention "poultry". So I decided that (in those times) "fowl" was probably an all-purpose word for birds, and went that way. Sorry if I've offended the purists.

Fargang (literally "far-going") was a word of a different order; for I needed to include several threads of meaning here. Firstly, yes, it was a journey, etched from South to North over English then Scottish

lands. Secondly, there was a hugely important religious element. Hence, the pledges to the god Seaxneat which were intended to ensure safe passage (and often did). Thirdly, the fellowship demanded of the men (that they did not desert the fargang for any reason) was a nod to the "mateship" factor which must necessarily encompass any such large undertaking. The fact that Murdo left the fargang, his work all unfinished, was a desertion, causing the enterprise to teeter on the edge.

Now to more mundane matters. Joan was dumped in favour of her younger sister. Well, I wanted to assure the reader that she ended up alright, but I did not care either way. I lost interest in her. If she believed that a woman should be with her man, then she could have chucked in her job at Jennings and move South. I just completely lost patience with her iffing and butting, so I allowed Charles to dump her unceremoniously.

The most amazing admission of all is this:-- Years ago, it seemed to me that there was an innate "mirthfulness" about the English, which must have seeped down from the Anglo-Saxons. There was an English version of "Ground Force" which illustrated just this concept; that the English can work and be amusing (both for us and for each other). In so many ways, Reg Thorrock encapsulated that marvellous jollity which is so very English. Even when he tried to be serious, that in-built mirth shone through. Arthur and Charles might have been dazzling heroes, but Reg was the stolid, cricket-playing Englishman who was so fashionable in pre- and post-war British films.

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