

# The Saelig Tales

*A Novella*

*Suhayl Saadi*

*Dedicated to Nadia Afza Shirin Hawwa Mirza-Saadi*

Ivy stretched over the walls of the Old Manse, covering the front of the building and most of the sides. Only to the rear was the foliage sparse, revealing patches of dun brick and Tudor oak. The green wooden door that once had been the servants' entrance stood open. Occasionally smells of cooking still would seep from the kitchen window, but now the only scents were those of the red and white roses which grew up the walls of the small garden which abutted upon that part of the house. The foliage was of the old type, with flowers the size of a child's palm. During the day they gave off a barely discernible odour, but towards evening, their scents would swell and flood through overhanging leaves of yew and elder, whose soft rustling fell almost into stillness as the light grew redder and the birdsong epiphanous.

A low iron gate set in the far wall led into the outer garden and orchard, which stretched right down to the slow-flowing Mychelham Water some hundred yards or so due east. On this August evening, smoke rose from the patio at the centre of the garden and coiled around the white canvas parasol under which the Reverend Edward Ingle Synnot was seated, partaking of a supper consisting of succulent green figs from a tree which stood on the other side of the garden wall, hard Danish cheese, freshlybaked bread and a carafe of finest Minho port. Between sips, he leaned back against the hard wicker of his chair and lit up an impressive Cuban cigar. Impressive, that is, if anyone had been watching this septuagenarian vicar, plus-fours-and-all, engaging in the typically bucolic pleasures of his Sunday evening. At that time on the Lord's Sabbath, when prayers had been said, wafers consumed, and robes relinquished with not a small measure of relief, his sole companions tended to be avian or insectiferous.

The vicar switched off a transistor radio to which he had been listening, laid down his cigar and, stretching across the wooden table, picked up a leather-bound book. It felt light in his hands, its faded white leather smooth against his skin. Using the tip of his index finger, he traced out the gold-leaf letters of the title on both jacket and spine and then lifted his right hand and squinted at the finger-tip; using the other fingers of the same hand, with a clumsy elegance he donned a pair of gold-rimmed, halfmoon reading spectacles, gazed at the white dust accrued on the whorls of his finger-pad, then sniffed it gently. His nose was long and firm, slightly rounded at its end, like the protuberance of a Henry Moore statue; his lips, once middling full, were pursed through long years of solicitude and intercessionary prayer; his eyes were the colour of well-seasoned oak. He removed a white handkerchief from his trouser pocket and wiped the dust onto the cloth. He undid the clasp, allowed the book to fall open, lifted away the white satin bookmark and began to read. He read inwardly, but if one were to have looked closely enough between, say, the broad leaves of an old yew tree, one might have made out the harmonic movement

of his lips and tongue. Perhaps a wandering white dog might have been capable of hearing the melody of his barely conscious vocalisation of the meanings which had been burned into the paper. Whether or not there was such a creature among the apple and pear trees of the orchard remains unknown, but the fact was that Reverend Synnot was no longer alone. Another man was sitting opposite him.

Edward only noticed him when the edge of the cigar-leaf most proximal to his fingers began to singe. As he stubbed out the cigar and glanced beyond the golden upper edge of a new page, his eyes caught the man's face. 'John!' he exclaimed with an easy smile, 'I didn't see you arrive.' The other swung back on his chair and folded his arms behind his neck. 'Sometimes even the animals don't notice me.'

'Years of hunting for poachers?'

'Aye. And for game.'

'In the old days, parsons used to hunt along with the other men.'

'Before my time, Canon Synnot.'

'Mine too! Come on John, you're as old as I – give or take a year or two. And you know full well that I am not a Canon, I have no cathedral around me, merely a village church.'

'These days the passing of a year assumes an importance, both critical and melancholy...'

'I see you're cheerful as usual. A hard day?'

'You choose to stay in your high steeple-house, protected for all eternity by the body of the Church Invisible.'

'Less choice than calling...'

'Bah! Rain on the window: pitter-patter, pitter-patter.'

John Rotherfield brought his hands down onto the table. They were large hands, calloused, the nails cracked here and there and with dirt ingrained into the knuckles. His hair was full for an old man. It looked as if it had been burned silver by the sun. His eyebrows were bushy and still black. Lines ran in every possible direction around his eyes, mouth and neck. He had come to resemble the crust of a dessicated planet which, aeons past, had been lush and green. Yet his frame was unbent and lithe. His gaze, fixed on a point behind and to the left of the other man's jacket, was so intense that Edward had an almost irresistible urge to turn around. However, he knew that following Rotherfield's deep blue eyes into whatever reveries he held within his head was a dangerous path to take; perhaps he was only looking at the climbing rose that had forced its tangled stem upwards against the crumbling brick ever since the days of Paine and Cobbett.

'You look like you could do with a cigar and a glass of the red!'

And without waiting for a reply, Edward poured him a generous measure of port, filling the glass to the point of overflowing. Without spilling a drop, he placed it before the gamekeeper. For an interval during which it seemed to Edward that he could hear the ticking of the grandmother clock on the wall of his study far within the house, Rotherfield's stare held him, as countless times it had held a pheasant, a deer or a snake. Yet it was he who looked away first. He threw back his head and gulped from the glass, his Adam's apple pulsing up and down the trunk of his throat. Edward noticed that Rotherfield had leaned a small axe and a bag of sticks against

the wall and shivered inexplicably.

Rotherfield lit his cigar. When he spoke again, his voice had dropped a quarter-octave.

‘What’s that you’re reading?’

‘Oh, a curiosity I picked up at the Sergison Manor sale a few weeks ago.’

Rotherfield reached across and took the book out of his hand.

‘*The Architecture of the Blessed...* who is the author?’

‘The name has been completely eroded.’

‘That’s strange, the title’s perfectly clear. There’s not even an indentation to suggest an author’s name was once there. What about inside?’

‘Nothing there either,’ Edward answered.

Rotherfield began flicking through the yellowed pages.

‘Strange...’ he said again.

Edward shrugged. ‘These old volumes harbour all manner of curiosity.

I have one which has been printed in looking-glass type and illustrated in reverse pictures. I have to use a mirror to read it.’

Rotherfield put the book down close to his glass, glanced down at his boots, exhaled slowly and then looked back up. Edward, for reasons he found difficult to identify, felt compelled to speak.

‘Do you remember, John, when we were young – before the Great War, before I became a priest – we used to go down to the riverbank and lie in boats and read to one another and sing, you, me and...’

‘Of course I remember,’ Rotherfield cut in.

‘It seems like another life, now. So much has changed.’

‘Everything has changed.’

‘Everything?’

‘All that matters.’

‘John, it’s time, surely it’s time, to... not to forget, we could never do that, but to heal. Or at least to carry on, to realise that God’s scheme is unfathomable, that His face is ineffable as even it was to Christ on the Cross in his moment of ultimate despair.’

‘Pretty words, Edward. Ragged sermons. Old music.’

It was a conversation which they’d had countless times over the years, and they always reached this same theological dead-end.

In spite of the lack of a breeze, Edward thought he heard the sound of river water rushing over flat stones. He was aware of Rotherfield’s eyes on him, that penetrating quality they had, the manner in which they darted away as though suddenly aware of their power. An oppressive sense of animalistic scrutiny made him shift uneasily in his chair. It was as though the presence of this old acquaintance had disturbed the plumb-line of the equilibrium which he had made for himself in the enclosed garden, the equilibrium which, by extension, held together his life within the Church of St Cuthman.

Rotherfield’s eyes had not sustained the veined tiredness of old age.

Nothing cracked the arc of their perfection. Edward felt the inadequacy, the banality of his own mud-brown irises. Never once in his seventy years had he perceived through those eyes the nature of God. Through all the gallons of blood-coloured wine and high-stacked ricks of bread, through sermons a million words long and christenings sufficient to drown half the host of Hell, cleavings and layings to earth enough to cultivate the seeds of

a nation, not once had the Reverend Edward Ingle Synnott felt the living presence of Christ.

‘You have sought solace within the pages of your books and the resonance of your stone chancels, while I...’ Rotherfield’s voice quivered like an arrow-shaft in oak.

‘You seek it in the woods, in the bark of dead tree-trunks, in your quarry at the quivering moment of death.’

‘How poetic you are. How pathetic.’

‘I think you need another drink.’

The woodcutter sighed.

‘Perhaps I do.’

The vicar obliged.

Rotherfield nodded.

‘Your cigar has gone out.’

Edward picked up the fat Havana, ignited its distal end and puffed away like a jazz cornetist until the smoke rose in perfect circles from the ends of the wrapped leaves. The birds now were of the evening: kestrels, curlews, night herons. Rotherfield breathed in deeply. He felt the garden roses fill his chest; and beyond, the sleeping ivy, the broad, grey beech; and the slowly rising veins of the yew began to course through his body where they met and joined with something that had burned there for years. In the depths of despair, nature had always redeemed him. Perhaps that was why, on the first Sunday of every month, he walked through the forest of Andrieda and crossed the Mychelham Water to take port and cheese and bread with the man with whom, in a manner of speaking, he had shared the same epoch. They would harangue each other and discuss metaphysical matters, or pore over treatises on nature or essays which purported to draw links between the exact geographical locations of various artists’ homes and their works. It had become an unofficial fixture in both men’s lives, these past ten years or so.

‘Read to me, Edward. Read as you used to do, among the hay and upon the green of the river-bank, when we were boys.’

‘I haven’t done that for years.’

‘All the more reason.’

‘Time moves on...’

‘There are at least three hours of daylight left. Time enough.’

‘Well, alright. I’ll read as long as I can manage. Sunday services tend to fray the voice.’

‘They fray my ears.’

‘Thank you, John.’

‘I hear the music, through the stone walls of your church. I feel the wind blowing through the organ-pipes.’

The vicar did not reply but instead fiddled with his reading glasses, which tended to slip progressively down his nose; because he adjusted them so often, the frame had become bent, so that they tended to sit on the bone at a slightly skewed angle, which made the tops of his ears rather uncomfortable.

Edward flipped through the pages until he found the chapter for which he’d been searching. As though he were about to place the book upon a lectern, he carefully smoothed down the spine, cleared his throat and

began to read.

'It says that this section was translated by the author from the original Anglo-Saxon, which means that he or she must have been a seeker-out of obsolete tongues, of languages which are no longer spoken or written, of words which have slipped from thought. It takes a particular kind of person to devote a life to that which is no more. We did a modicum of Anglo-Saxon at Theological College, not enough for me to be able to decipher the original version of this text.'

Edward turned the book around to demonstrate exactly what he meant. Rotherfield leaned across the table and peered closely. He made out a series of oddly-shaped letters, some of which were familiar, others completely alien. It was as though the mundane letters which he used every day had become intoxicated by the passage of time. Some appeared to have been speared through the middle, others resembled thorns, gibbets, musical notes or intertwined fingers. The vicar resumed:

*These are the works, in vellum, of Aelfric, Abbott and builder of the Church of Wywurth in the land of South Saxons, who died on the Day of the Feast of St Thomas in 872 Anno Domini. They were discovered sealed in an iron casket held within the walls at the crown-end of a pyramidal-shaped tomb close to the east line of the square chancel in the old churchyard of Oxney, East Sussex. The tomb was of more recent date, and so the assumption must be that the casket had been removed from its original place of secretion, which may have been somewhere beneath the church floor, and moved to the cist of one Sir Cuthman Harris, good Squire of Oxney who was born on the 10th March in the Year of Our Lord 1654 and who departed this world on 15th December in the Year of Our Lord 1729. The reason for its removal and deposition are unknown to the author.*

These are the words of I, Aelfric, who is the Abbott of Wywurth in the Land of the South Saxons. For some twenty winters, since work on this most holy abode of God hath, with His Grace, been completed, I have been engaged in collecting and committing unto manuscript the songs and customs of this land of mine and of applying to said musics the principles and incantations of Pope Sylvester of Rome who lived among the Saracens in the lands to the south of the Dominion of the Franks and who learned there of many hellish things which yet might lead unto a knowledge of the perfect proportions of Paradise and the various lights with which said garden be illumin'd. Through rain and snow and pestilence and great temptation, have I laboured these twenty years in dark cloisters of the soul, and in my searches, I have travelled across very near the entirety of the Marks of the land of the South Saxons. I have waded through the shadows of wayside Roods, I have inscribed the dances and songs, vigorous and gentle, of the thanes and the ceorls and those, too of their womenfolk; these are folk of mine own stock and yet through this long quest, do I sense a great river flowing between mine own soul and that of the men who live and die around my cell. With crot, horn and monochord, I am as a wave pon the sea. I have grown separate even from the fellow-brothers of mine own abbey. They know little of my work and perhaps tis best that way, since they possess neither the wisdom to comprehend its span, nor the reason to put it to use. If they had their way, they might liken to burn such manuscripts as I create, for such as the Æcer-bót is believed by many in this land of

ours to be works of the Devil.

And truth be written, I rest uneasy upon the labours of my stylus, for God knows what twists and coils and devilish airs may be assumed and read into even the most innocent of letters. The Word may have been issued from the moving spirit of Our Lord, yet having descended into this world of men, it is not trammelled with the good as oxen are to plough.

But these nights I must speed my labours, my reed must slip across bull-skin as wax floweth into the flame. A dark wind bloweth from the east, and I know not what our fate will be, a month from now. In this work I am ably abetted by one novice monk, Aetheric, whom very near from the cradle I did school in the arts in which my soul is embroiled through the course of this life. I work with said Aetheric in a space which lieth neath the beams of the tower roof and from this vantageous point can we witness the rise and fall of the sun and the moon and the sway and heave of the tides and rivers of the sky, and also can we spie any intruder, man or woman, thane or ceorl, who might emerge from the depths of the forest. In the past few weeks we have made out, along the far eastern rim, a long line of black and gold. These be the clinker ships of the North-Men with their golden beaks and their massed oars, scything through the white waves along the line of the coast. I have spotted the works of these brutes at close hand, when once I was travelling through the lands of the Jutes of old in search of some ancient manuscripts said to have been quill'd by none other than the Archbishop Elphege of East Kent. From my vantagepoint, I watched Norse-Men storm into the town and slaughter all, even unto the whining dogs and gawking hens! They took the Archbishop into the square, where they cast him upright upon whole bone and horns of an ox, and then one of them struck him with an axe-iron on the head, so that with the blow he and the bony frame sank down. Then, him being still alive, they proceeded to slit his back with an axe, twice, and deep, so that he screamed as I have never before heard man or beast scream. Then they turned him over and hacked open his chest, again in form of two straight lines, running in angle parallel. Then they forced apart the rib-sticks of his heart-cage and left him there on the wealden mud of the village square, his heart beating to the white sky, his back broken into wings, to perish in the greatest of agonies. I had heard this devilish practice called by the Dark Strangers themselves, 'The Rite of the Blood Eagle'. After they had completed their terrible deed, the savages did take the body and strip it of skin, laying it thus, raw and open, to the vultures and wolves and mad dogs who do follow the hoofprints of death wherever that great beast doth roam. On their left shoulder they carried an axe and on their right, an iron spear. Each man wore two gold bracelets on either arm and on his head, a gilt helmet. They were bearded and their faces were stamped with expression, most terrible and pagan.

I hurried myself away from the awful scene and I did not stop till I reached the wayside cross which sits pon the east bank of the east tributary of the River Mychelham, which divides the lands of the Kentish folk from the marches of the South Saxons. There, as I lay down to rest, I smelled the river most foul and horrid. When I raised my head to look upon the waters, I saw that they did flow red. Yet I had to cross the ford, since if I had remained where I was, the Dark Strangers

would surely have found my hiding-place and I would have suffered the selfsame fate of the good Archbishop. I waited a little, in the hope that the waters might clear, but with no sign of this impending, I took up my scapular in my arms and waded through the blood-drenched river. The stench of it caused my head to spin, so that I almost tumbled into the red flood. Yet the current flowed fast and I knew that if once I fell, I would be unable to rise again and would drown in the blood of Mother Church. So I strode on, all the while intoning a bede to Our Lord.

At the moment when I felt that I could move no further, at the very middle point of the river, I closed my eyes and implored the skies to come to my aid. For I carried with me manuscripts most precious, which I had obtained that very morning from the most saelig archbishop, and if I drowned, they would be gone forever; the ink of their vellum would run and flow through the rivers of the land and be lost in the southern sea. But already my legs were turning to viscid water and I felt as though I would dissolve into the great river. At that moment, I heard the sound of a woman's voice. It was a song which I had never before heard and the words were in a language which I did not understand, or else which now I have forgotten. On that fateful afternoon in the full-spated river, I found that I understood as though I had long known the words of this song, which, though mournful, was not akin to the funeral dirges of our age, but seemed to issue from a time, long past, or else, yet to come. The fluid of the music rendered unto my sinews the power to continue my journey, and so I was able to cross the river and return by these many leagues, to the abbey. I know not the explanation for this happening, nor yet who the woman was that sang so beautifully to me on that day. Perhaps it was the Holy Spirit. I know not.

Aelfric sat at his desk by the opening between the sloping wooden roof of the church tower and the wall and as he gazed across the village to the rods of farmland which lay outside of ditch, bank and palisade, his eyes came to rest upon the ochre wastes beyond the yew forest. The great Southern Sea was some seven leagues away, yet he could smell its sharp blade. The day was hard and cold and clear and as it turned slowly to night, the freezing air settled in complete stillness over the surface of the forest lake. In the morning he would brush away the thin dust of snow from its surface and see himself as though he were lying on the bed of the lake. The sun had abandoned the eastern sky, yet its beams overflowed from beneath the horizon, turning the columns of smoke which issued from the Moot Hill to bronze. Aelfric imagined the smoke to be earthly angels, sent to protect the abbey from the deprivations of the Dark Strangers. The thin trails hung unmoving in the still air, like the sung notes of the dead. As he moved about the belfry, Aelfric felt that he was the only thing on earth whose swing and metal had not been still'd. The smells of the village, smells of poultry and pigs, stale hay and green waste, wafted to the top of the tower, yet like the smoke they thinned as they rose. From where he was, Aelfric could not hear any of the chopping, shouting and grinding that would be going on below; such sounds as had accompanied the building of this humble and yet wondrous church. Aelfric had supervised every aspect of the construction, from foundation ditch to belfry roof. It would have been another man's life's work; under his hand, the church had been completed within a mere twenty years.

The plan for the building had come to him through a dream in the form of musical notches. Upon waking, he had grabbed his quill and rushed to his vellum, but once there, he had been unable to transcribe even one of the sounds he had heard. At first he had despaired, for the music had been beautiful and wondrous, but then he had realised that such celestial notes could never be scratched with the end of a bird feather onto animal skin. For twenty years the song had remained hidden in his head, and yet he had been able, somehow, to reach down as though through a dark firmament and follow that which was held therein and so, winter-upon-summer, his church had been built.

The basic plan was that of a Cross with arms of equal length. The main – north – portal was very plain, with a single rose window above it. The ceiling was vaulted and supported by pillars with ornamental shafts. The building was taller than it was broad and culminated in a large dome resting on spherical triangles. At times, especially when it was empty first thing in the morning and the light angled in appropriate manner, the Abbey of Wywirth seemed more like a cathedral than a humble village church. At the centre of the dome, a great golden sun beamed so brightly down upon apse and nave that the whole building seemed to be illuminated. Painted in faint outline behind the sun was a black, square-shaped rood. Most of the interior was unadorned, save for the east entrance. There, carved into the stone, and protruding from it, was the face of a young woman, complete with hair and neckband. Around the face grew tendrils of reeds and leaves of ivy and the whole was set above the door with the visage inclined slightly downwards so that it seemed as though the woman was gazing at folk as they entered. The bell-tower was reputed to be the highest in the lands of the South Saxons, and though he had not climbed each one and measured the rival steeples, stone-upon-stone, Aelfric believed this to be true.

The church had been built using huge sandstone blocks taken from the ruins of buildings of the Old Romans, blocks so heavy that it had taken eight yoke of oxen just to move them the fifteen leagues. He had no idea where the plan for the Abbey of Wywirth had come from, it was like no house of God he had ever seen or heard of, but it had succeeded, it stood upright, its dome and tower punched into the sky. The perfect music which he had heard in his dream was set now in stone.

Up in the chamber of the bell-tower it was as though he were enclosed in a cell, a monastic cell, yes, but more than that, an enclosed space like that which might exist in a book, or a song, or a tomb. Such a place might exist in the lower reaches of heaven, or the hinterlands of paradise. This land was indeed a holy land.

He sighed and, with a groan, raised his frame from the chair and rubbed his lower back; too many hours of poring over half-decayed manuscripts, styling notes into tablets of wax and finally, once all the calculations had been made and the courses of logic run, drawing reed across vellum beneath a tallow light. For several days he had neglected to shave, or even to follow the Rule of Benedict. As he had done many times over the years, Aelfric asked forgiveness of his Creator for these faults, hoping for some dispensation, given the urgency of his task: to complete the cycle of songs, musics and arithmetical calculations which would yield, if not to him then

at least to some future scholar, the ability to dance in seamless, lacertine geometer across this land and thus to scry the future and even the nature of that most elusive of mysteries, death.

Aelfric went over to a low table and poured some wine from an urn into a blue glass, swung back his head and gulped so rapidly that it made him choke and cough. He wiped the back of his hand across his lips and drank some more. These past few days he had existed on wine and stale bread and his legs felt like fish-guts. All his brother monks had fled towards the lands of the West Saxons, which yet held secure, but he and his helper Aetheric had remained here with the intention of hiding the manuscripts and themselves until the North-Men had gone their way. Then they would re-emerge, knowledge and wisdom intact – qualities they would carry on their backs north, south, east and west. They had to stay to complete the work not so much because the Abbey of Wywurth was one of the last places where they might find seclusion and materials with which to continue; more because of the head of Alcuin, which could not be moved from there, e'en until Doomsday.

Aelfric tensed. Footsteps, growing louder. Three knocks, followed by four: it was their code. He went over and turned the iron handle. The door swung open, revealing a breathless Aetheric. The Abbott turned away, folded his hands behind his back.

'Well, didst thou find any meat?' he asked, sternly.

'None, Master Abbott. There is nothing to be found for twenty acres in any direction. I spent the whole day searching.'

'And didst thou return, empty-handed?'

'Aye,' Aetheric nodded. His eyes were bright with the dreams of youth and angels, but he, too, was unshaven and his face had grown long, his eyes red-rimmed with sleepless nights. 'Except for this.'

In the opened palm of his outstretched hand, Aetheric held a sparkling piece of jet, cut in the shape of an eye.

'What is it?' Aelfric asked, taking the stone from him. 'It is smooth and polished like jewellery, yet it is like none which I have seen. Where didst thou find it?'

Aetheric hesitated. 'I was given it.'

'Given it? By whom?'

'By a mendicant with a flowing white beard...' he sighed deeply, 'and eyes the colour of the sea.'

'And where didst thou meet this mendicant?'

'Upon the ruins of Moot Hill.'

'The ruins? But the hoolets do not inhabit the Moot. Who has ruined it? The thane yet guards it with his life.'

Aetheric shook his head. 'No, Father Abbott. The thane has fled and only penniless wanderers now inhabit its hall. They are using the wood of walls and roof for fuel.'

Aelfric walked over to the gap of light. What the novice had said must indeed be true. Smoke, dancing lithe and curvaceous, was rising to such a height over the village as he had never before seen. It must be that, timber by timber, the building itself was being fed to the fire.

The shapes the smoke made against the sky resembled great thorns, or Viking axes, or demons, and the smell it gave out was of sulphur. It

was as though Hellfire itself had descended upon Wywurth and upon the world, thought Aelfric, feeling the stone smooth and warm in his hand. He became angry.

‘What use is this stone, thou fool? It is a piece of trickery. What didst thou pay for it?’

‘One silver pening.’

‘Madman!’

‘What worth hath money, now? The eye hath special powers. It came from the lands of the Salernii.’

The Abbott’s face contorted. ‘I tarry all hours poring over these manuscripts, I scry blóts and bedes unknow’d e’en to the most learned amongst us, I neither eat nor drink – save for worm-infested bread and stale Communion Wine (for which I ask God’s forgiveness) – and thou, whom I have brought into the light of knowledge these past fifteen winters, thou wandereth among mendicants and render unto them compense for common rocks!’

So saying, he raised his arm and cast the stone to the floor, where it broke into eleven thousand pieces. There was a loud bang and the room filled with smoke so dense it caused their eyes to water. Then, as Aelfric made the sign of the rood across his chest, he thought he heard music. It was of the same rhythm as the music which the thanes played and to which the scops sang in the great Moot Halls across the lands of the Saxons. Yet this leoðsong seemed to issue from the very core of his being. It was soon as though his very bones were singing. Although he could not make out the words, they seemed known to him, as if they had once fallen from the lips of a lover. (Aelfric was surprised that this thought had occurred to him, since, even in dream, he had never possessed a woman.)

The song was at once the rise and fall of the tide in spring, the sound of snow falling on a stone tomb, the spinning memory of long galleries and fire-shadows.

And now, at the same instant, Aelfric and his novice discerned the form of a woman dancing in the billowing smoke. A prayer dried on Aelfric’s lips as he watched her grow more substantial, until she stood before them, tall and willowy, her black tunic and mantle affixed with a brooch in the shape of a sun, a necklace of jet-stone and silver wire at her throat. Her eyes are river-fish grey, thought Aelfric. Her face, long and unnaturally white, reminded him of his own, reflected in the mirror of the frozen lake. The woman’s lips were moving. She started intoning the words of a song:

It was long, long ago –

Yet I recall – when at the forest’s edge,  
I was hewn down and my stem removed  
Resistless were the foes that seized me there,  
They fashioned for themselves a spectacle,  
Commanded me to bear their criminals.

Aelfric cleared his throat and addressed her. ‘From where dost thou hail, and for what purpose?’

She turned towards him and as she did so, her black hair came loose from its clasp and danced across her visage in manner akin to a leafy yew branch caressed by the breeze.

‘I am from the river beneath the mountain. I am from the Isle of the Sea-Calf where the fisherman turned the people from the raven to the speaking wood. My name is Aethelflaed. Within me, there rages the passion

of eleven thousand virgins.'

Aelfric shot a glance at the novice, who lowered his gaze.

The woman continued, and it was as though she were singing her words.

'Within me, O monk, the heart of Inge-land doth beat strong. I am in the grains of rock, in the silver of springs, in the time between tides, in the moots of the seas where whales and dolphins sing and spinneth tales. I am in shank of bull and breast of cow. I am in the eyes of the lover.'

'Good maiden, dost thou reside also in the ink and gold of my manuscripts?'

'The words which you have scratched across skin and beat into silver and bled into stone, those colours of earth which you have drawn from land and river will be burned and washed away, forever lost to those who come after you.'

Aelfric felt as though his legs were about to give way. He stumbled to his chair, and almost fell into it. The novice went to him.

'Are you alright, Father Abbott?' he said solicitously. 'Thy pale face and silvery hair possesses a gleam more akin to metal than to man.'

'I... I do not know, Aetheric. In the name of God, I do not know.'

'Let me bring thee a drink.' Aetheric lifted a tumbler to his master's lips and the Abbot drank of the Holy Communion wine.

A little recovered, he continued, 'Spirit of the dark stone, for mercy's sake, pray tell us poor mortals what we must do to save the manuscripts, the words and songs of the folk who dwell within this life as from mark to mark. Pray sing to us as thou didst sing to me upon the bloodied ford, that summer's afternoon.'

The maiden smiled and moved toward the two monks. She was taller than the tallest man in the village; she stood over six foot; and she progressed in manner light and subtle, hardly skimming the ground. Her feet were bare. She sat upon the other chair, rested her arms on the table and laid the soft, white skin of her palms upon the coarse vellum of the manuscripts.

'Rest thy fear, good Father Abbott, for this winter's day shalt thou attain the fruit of thy labours. Thou shalt perceive of such that only one mortal man hast seen before thee, and only one other will in days yet to come.'

'Good lady, dost thou mean that I shall seek out and find safe places where this vellum might be secreted?' She motioned across the room, toward the shafts of light which poured in through the wooden frame.

'That, and much more besides.'

'I do not fear death, only the pain of transition. I am old and I have lived here in this abbey for most of my life. I have prayed to my Maker most scrupulously through the Rule of Saint Benedict and if it is time for me to depart, then I am ready.'

'Make not that mistake: I am not sliced from the finger of thy God.'

'Then art thou...?'

'I do not hail from the dark regions, nor from the talon of thy Beast.'

'From whence, then, dost thou arise?'

'Thou shalt gain apprehension of whither I do arise; for now, suffice it to say that I was here before thy God, before thy Devil. I am in the grains of the stone which thy novice didst crack, in the leaves not yet in bud; along the long roots of thine eyes do I sprout, through the blood coils of thy brain do I run. Abbott – I am in thine heart.'

'Lord God, save us!'

'Beyond and beneath salvation and damnation, there am I. Thy manuscripts sing the songs of my soul and of all the souls which dance and sail within mine.'

Aetheric now gulped down some Communion Wine. 'Good lady, forgive me, but when I look upon thee I forget the vows I am to take. I grow dizzy...'

She reached out and took his hand. 'Good novice, I will guide thee on the voyage which thou must undertake.'

'Thy hand is soft, yet cold as ice.'

'The journey is long, and though like Sylvester thou be on't, yet thou wilt not perceive aught of the marks and crosses thereof.'

'I care not. If the journey be into the light, what matter this beat of the sparrow's wing? Death is but a mask on the face of the everlasting.'

'Thy master, Abbott Aelfric, shall be the watcher. His soul has grown greater than most. No hlaford, no guardian of the loaf, can make this journey. No man who liveth in the joys of the mead-hall can venture pon such moots as this voyage will require; only the wraecca will be able to scribe that which he will see. He alone can save thee from the fiery jaws of the terrible green nicor, from the surfeits of this life.'

The Abbott gathered up his writing materials – vellum, reed and pigments – and sat alert at his desk. The light was still strong, yet at its fulcrum was a hint of the darkness which covereth all. He tied the rope tightly around him, so that his clothing seemed more shroud than habit. The black-haired lady placed her hands upon the shoulders of the novice. Her fingers were long and bony, the nails like icicles on the point of melting. She drew him to the centre of the room. He closed his eyes and began to sway. She threw her head back so that her long mantle of hair swept like the wakes of a thousand long-ships across her tunic. Her mouth opened but at first no sound issued from her throat. Then, as Aelfric watched, the muscles between jaw and collar-bones began to pull and ripple and stretch and her head swung from side to side, as though she were in a trance of prayer. The movements grew until it seemed as though they would rip her skull from her spine. As a trickle of blood began to flow from her neck, she began to sing in a voice high-toned as a lark's, yet strong as a raven's. Aetheric who was now unclothed lay with his spine curved against the pig-iron of the bell, his skin glowing silver like that of the maiden. The notes from which the lines and strokes and dots that wet the vellum had arisen resonated in the Abbott's skull. The white-faced scop began singing in his wanderer's soul.

*Where is the horse and the rider? Where is the giver of gold?  
Where be the seats and the banquet? Where be the hall-joys of  
old?*

*Alas for the burnished cup, for the byrnied chief of today!  
Alas for the strength of the prince! For the time hath passed  
away –*

*Is hid neath the shadow of night, as it never had been at all.  
Behind the dear and doughty there standeth now a wall,  
A wall that is wondrous high, and with wondrous snake-work  
wrought.*

*The strength of the spears hath fordone the earls and hath made*

*them naught,  
The weapons greedy of laughter, and she, the mighty Wierd;  
And the tempests beat on the rocks, and the storm-wind that  
maketh afeard –  
The terrible storm that fetters the earth, the winter-bale,  
When the shadow of night falls wan, and wild is the rush of the hail,  
The cruel rush from the north, which maketh men to quail.  
Hardship full is the earth, o'erturned when the stark Wierds say:  
Here is the passing of riches, here friends are passing away;  
And men and kinsfolk pass, and nothing and none may stay;  
And all this earth-stead here shall be empty and void one day...*

Her song continued, yet now it was a reflection, a didymus, the form merely of a tale as she swayed back and forth with Aetheric the Novice against the metal arc of the bell and Aelfric the Abbott scribed faster than ever he had scribed, pigments and inks flying from the end of his reed quill. The music which he plied in the form of words melded with the last rays of light which sleeked into the belfry like the blades of langseaxes. And as he wrote, the land itself rose up, chain upon perch upon rood upon acre, and Aelfric saw far into a realm where energy grows form.

Reverend Synnott laid the book, still open, upon the table. He sighed and sat back in his chair. His face was pale and his eyes flitted like bird seeking perch about the branches of the trees outside the garden.

Rotherfield watched all this. 'How beautiful,' he said, 'and how false.'

'Why false?' the vicar asked, his pallor increasing.

Rotherfield shrugged. 'The seeking after pagan gods or goddesses is as pointless as the quest for the Holy Grail. Myth, constructed out of a longing for meaning and structure, when there is none.'

'Even space possesses inherent structure...'

'Human life, it seems to me, is one great betrayal.'

Edward was silent. He concentrated on the crumbling upper edge of the wall some four feet above Rotherfield's shoulder. The scent of roses was growing stronger, mingled with the inspissated odour of old brick. Soon night would sweep over everything, turn colour to formless black.

'That day, before the war, when we took small boats down to the river, yonder...'

Rotherfield jerked his thumb back to indicate the direction of the river which flowed beyond the wood's far edge.

'We rowed boats often.'

'That day was different.' Rotherfield inhaled, looked around him. 'It was a little like today: summer, albeit early afternoon, the sun shining, the heat pouring off the fields, along the branches of the trees, down the shallow banks and into the oxbows of the river.'

'We were very young.'

'Not so young.'

'Strange ideas...'

'We had the idea of rowing for a stretch and then lying down in the bowl of the hull so that, viewed from the bank, it would seem as though the boats were empty, simply flowing with the current.'

'It was silly idea,' Edward said. 'Dangerous, even on a slow-flowing river.'

'The river was low with the dry summer. The reeds had risen almost to the surface, you could see them waft by like the notes of a symphony.'

‘You, me, and...’

‘Caroline.’

The vicar sighed and thrust his legs out straight, leaned back on his elbows and gazed up at the sky as though he were back fifty years, in the narrow rowing-boat as it bobbed along in the middle of the river. The willows hung heavy over the water. He felt the rough, warm planks of the hull rub against his naked shoulders. Through the soles of his feet, which were planted against the arched walls of the craft, he felt the parting movement of the waters and at the same time, against the curvature of his skull, he felt them come together as though his passage had been merely a solitary bubble moving through their substance.

‘I dream of her, often. Even after all these years.’ Rotherfield’s voice was ragged like the black sky tearing back into stars. ‘Her eyes, her hair...’

‘Stop.’

‘...the smell of her skin amidst the leaves and summer heat. The sound of her voice a particular music.’

‘Stop it, John. Stop now.’

‘Her soul sings to me across the abyss.’

‘I cannot listen to this!’

‘Why not? Why should I stop? I will not stop, that you may feel less guilty. So that you, the grand Reverend of the Church of St Cuthman’s of Wywurth, vicar of all that he surveys, might continue to enjoy the odd summer’s evening with a man whom all these years he has considered a friend?’

‘Are we not friends, John?’

‘Do not patronise me using my Christian name like that! I am Rotherfield, the local gamekeeper-cum-woodcutter-cum-village-idiot.’

‘You were never an idiot.’

‘Oh yes, I was. I was the one who followed the clarion call. I was the one who leapt like a fool into the trenches!’

‘You haven’t brought any of this up for years. Why today?’

‘I don’t know. That story – it reminds me of something... I could smell the village with its wood fires and its snorting hogs, the stench of its sewage, poxes weeping from the skin, the creeping of the mud dead. I have been there.’

‘We all thought you were dead. There was no word for over two years.’

Rotherfield had been captured at Gallipoli and held in a Turkish jail full of Armenians, Greeks and Kurds (then known as Saracens). The absence of any other British prisoners struck him as strange, and only later did he learn that he had been held apart from his countrymen deliberately. The Turks started moving him further and further east until he ended up in Kars, a God-forsaken huddle of dun-coloured buildings where, for nine months out of twelve, snow and ice ruled.

One day, while he was breaking rocks on a barren, rain-swept hillside, he was approached by a man carrying a long stick. He walked with a slight limp and was aged around forty, though it was hard to be sure. Rotherfield had never talked about this before, but now his gaze encompassed the vicar as he described the visitation.

‘He wore a short, pointed beard, like a Renaissance aristocrat or stage magician. His eyes were black and almond-shaped, his skin olive. He

greeted me by name in English and then he handed me a card. I wiped the sweat and rain from my eyes to read it: The House of Dhu'l-kif, Rum Milet 786 A, Fanar, Istanbul.

'Then I realised where I had seen him before – at Gallipoli. He had been on a ridge not fifty yards from me, and he just stood there, outlined against the sky in his Turkish Army battle-cap and greatcoat. It was a miracle he wasn't shot straight off, yet as the sun fell into the sea, releasing its redness over everything, he lit a cigarette and started to smoke in a most leisurely manner. Though my rifle was loaded and ready I did not shoot him, yet I could not tear my eyes away from him. Sunset gave way to intense darkness. There was no moon and I began to shiver with the damp and cold. I assumed that the man had gone back down into his trench, though I couldn't be sure; he had vanished with the light. For all I knew, he might still have been there, staring at me.

'When I returned to the present and looked up, I was shocked to discover that the bearded figure who had handed me his card only moments before had disappeared. The hillside was covered with boulders, rocks and piles of scree and I supposed that it might have been possible for him to hide, but although I scoured it with my eyes hour upon hour, I saw no one emerge on the slope.

'Some weeks later, I was woken in the middle of the night by the sound of clanging. I was so exhausted from stone-breaking that I always slept like the dead. But now consciousness came. There was a party of soldiers at the door. At least, I assumed they were soldiers; they had that bearing and they were holding guns. They were clad from head-to-toe in black. Long, black cloaks and leather boots. They stormed into the hut but despite the noise they made and the light from their torches, not one of my fellow-prisoners stirred. They were still snoring away, some with incongruous smiles on their grizzled faces. The other odd thing was that the soldiers' armaments were at least fifty years out-of-date. Things might have been getting pretty dire for the armies of Europe, but not to the extent of being reduced to the muzzle-loading muskets of the Crimean War. And so these were not regulars of the Turkish Army.

'I was still only half-awake when I felt a hand on my left shoulder and realised they had come for me. I grabbed my greatcoat and stumbled outside. The bitter air smelled of stale lemons and chilled the sweat on my skin. I felt utterly hopeless. I was three thousand miles from home and the woman I loved.

The shapes of the prison huts loomed like dolmens into the sky. Dawn was a thin line on the rim of the eastern horizon and down in the valley, the minarets of the town caught the first light. The only thing that kept me going as we trudged across the dusty black mountains of eastern Anatolia was the thought that my captors evidently did not intend to kill me quite yet. The men spoke not a word. When I indicated that I needed to urinate, they paused and allowed me to do so, but I was never allowed out of their sight. As the light grew stronger, I tried to make out their faces but somehow my senses could not hold on to any of their features. They seemed like the landscape; rugged, swarthy and endlessly repetitive. All of them wore the same style of moustache. I wondered whether they were deserters, but then how could they have managed to get into the camp, torches and all? It had been strange that no-one had stopped us – unless they had killed the

sentries. I had seen no bodies, no blood, no sign whatsoever of a struggle. 'All those months in the prison-camps, breaking stones and eating food that tasted like old leather, had weakened me and I breathed with considerable difficulty in this high terrain. I was certain of one thing. The mysterious figure whom I had seen twice now, was not among this group.

'It was almost noon when at last we stopped and sat among some rocks. The men laughed and talked amongst themselves in a language which I didn't recognise. It was the first time I had heard them speak. They unwrapped some provisions and began to eat and drink with gusto, offering me nothing, although I was slumped on the stony ground, my limbs shaking, salivating uncontrollably.

'After about fifteen minutes, I heard a bugle blast, a sound that brought back terrible memories of the trenches. The bandits – for that was what they must be – leapt to their feet and gathered up their bags, guns and flasks; for the first time, there seemed to be some measure of urgency to their actions.

They marched me to the top of a ridge, on the other side of which I expected to see yet another endless plateau. However, it was quite different. A breeze blew into my face, much fresher than any I had experienced since my incarceration. I suppose I was lightheaded with exhaustion and hunger – but I felt as though, if I stayed there for long enough, the skin of my face, and thence the rest of my being, might at last begin to heal. I let my eyelids close and then open again. Before me was a vast body of water, so broad that I could barely make out the far bank. Tiny waves coursed across its surface and with every roll of crest into trough, the colour of the water seemed to change from turquoise to deep blue.

'On the near bank, a small sailing ship was moored. The bugle must have sounded from there. I was taken down to the ship where I was met a man of medium height clad in the same rough, stained clothes and black boots and with an identical regulation moustache as the others. I was certain that in the tiny box cabin, there would be hanging an old wooden musket.

'The vessel had a single, large sail and its prow curved upwards almost in the shape of a scimitar, so that it reminded me of one of those pictures of ancient Greek ships I had seen in picture-books as a child. As the hull coursed through the waves, I let my arm hang over the side and felt the spray leap up onto my fingers. I tasted the water. It was fresh and clean and I scooped some up and drank. I could have drunk the lake. The men were laughing and pointing at me. First the obsolete muskets and now the archaic ship; I felt as though I coursing back in time.

'There were some islets in the lake and we avoided those, but after about an hour of rapid sailing along the keel of the wind, I saw that we were approaching a larger island with a jetty, where we moored. I was soon treading a path that led up a steep hill which turned gradually into a small mountain. The peak was of that grey stone which is the natural bedrock in those parts. Flaky, yet very hard.

'Eventually we came to a ruined church, octagonal in shape. I had spotted similar buildings when I had been brought by horse-drawn truck across the wastes of Erzurum to the prison-camp, but this was by far the largest and most ornate. The stone was decorated with elegant carvings of beasts, both real and mythical, and long, curling fronds of exotic flora. These old

churches had been built of white sandstone, quite different from the indigenous slate. We stood before a wooden door, carved across its entire surface with exotica. The ship's captain produced a large, pig-iron key from his greatcoat. At first, the door would not open and four men had to lean their combined weight against its bulk before the hinges began to creak. 'It was cool inside, and musty. A few small animal skeletons littered the stone flags before the altar. The men removed these with incongruous reverence. They indicated that I should sit on the uppermost step and then, without a word, either to me or to one another, they left, closing the heavy door behind them with considerably less difficulty than it had taken them to swing it open. It closed with a finality which made my heart quiver. Their footsteps receded up the mountain path and then there was almost complete silence. Almost, because from outside the church came a choir of birdsong. I had never heard so many different tones.

'I wondered how the dead animals had managed to enter, given that the stained glass of the windows was intact. I wondered whether there might be a cellar, with a drain or suchlike. But if they had managed to get in, how had they been trapped here on the stone flags? I shuddered, drew my arms around myself and pushed the thought from my mind. There, in the strange, eight-sided church, I was completely alone. Apart, that is, from the pictures.

'Behind the altar and that at the opposite end of the nave, the walls were covered with frescos. At first, I thought these were the usual stylised Byzantine images, for the sunlight which penetrated the stained glass illuminated only small sections at any one time. As I gazed more closely, I began to make out other images. The bearded faces of Saints Cyprian and Cornelius and the bleeding, disembodied, yet grimly smiling caput of Cecilia all hung suspended from a great arc which billowed backwards into the stone, an omphalos whose peak was not visible in the fresco. The right eye of Saint Cyprian seemed especially black and hollow and I remembered those old mystery-books where just such a hollow was actually a spy-hole. That made me wish for a torch that I could shine up into the face of the converted magician of Antioch, to prove that the eye had a socket!

'Between the religious icons were mythical beasts and flora similar to those which had been carved into the stone walls of the church. There was something about the lines and curves made by the bodies of these animals which seemed to resonate with the arched brows of the saints and with the whole structure of the building. It was strange that I should have been receptive to such things; after all, I was half-starved and hadn't had much more than a sip of water since I had been frog-marched from the prison-camp, which even though I had been there for so long, now seemed a world away.

'I did not even consider attempting escape; surely if there had been a way out of there, then those poor beasts would have found it. And even supposing I had managed somehow to wriggle out of the church, where would I have gone? The island had seemed utterly deserted, and the vessel that brought me there must have left hours ago. Yet in that ancient space, an immense sense of peace descended upon me. I could feel its weight press down on my shoulders and on the muscles of my scalp, my brow, my eyelids, which seemed, then, to bear the same brushstrokes as those of the saints.

'I awoke with my tongue fixed hard against my palate, my head pounding and one side of my body frozen. In the trenches and in the prison camps, it had never been completely dark. The lamps would shine upwards from the trench-lines, creating the eerie effect of a fire in a burning grave. Which I suppose is exactly what those damned places were. And the camp guards had always kept torches burning around the perimeter, to prevent anyone getting any ideas about slipping out. I had forgotten just how dark it gets in the countryside. I grew up in the heart of the country but only a few months of war made me into a different person; even my memories had changed, some slipping away, while others fashioned themselves into great idols in my consciousness.

'Only a wan light staved off pitch darkness. I could make out the darkened glass of the windows, but could see nothing of the pictures which they bore, nor any details of the wall-frescos. I rose stiffly to my feet. I had no memory of falling asleep. The last thing I could remember was gazing up at Saint Cecilia, right into those doe-brown eyes of hers. There had been something cold and distant about the beatified ones. I had seen so many men perish without meaning in the mud of Flanders, Alsace, Thrace. The old masters knew that we are born into air, we dwell here, perhaps we spawn, then we die. To attribute individuality or significance to this husk of flesh is hubris. They knew romantic love to be little more than a conjoining of lust and the sublimated infantile need to be taken into the warmth of another being. That was all. Their saints were appropriately distant, emotionless; sometimes a half-smile might play about the lips of the female ones, yet when one glanced back at the image, the smile would be gone.

'I needed water. If I didn't get water, I would die. I had one more day, perhaps two, then I would slip by degrees into unconsciousness. I found the font by touch. I turned my wrists with the thumbnails facing forwards along the rim so that I would be able to pull myself back up when I had finished drinking. Closed my eyes. Bent down. Let my head sink into the bowl.

'Dust. I spat. The foul taste of something dead. Feathers, hair. I spat again. The font was empty. Had been, for years. It had become a place where small animals came to die. I felt that I would vomit, but did not even have the strength.

'Now my spirits sank lower than ever and my mind became utterly flat. I cannot say that I was depressed; in those days, no-one used the word. I had become incapable of feeling, or thinking, anything. Inasmuch as being consists of an idea propelled by desire and directed by the will, in that deserted church on an uninhabited island in the vast desolation of eastern Anatolia, the being known as John Rotherfield was an emptied cup.

'I lay on the stone flags and gazed up at the chapel roof. My eyes must have become accustomed to the near-darkness, for now I saw that, like the walls, the arches and beams of the roof had been carved in the shapes of exotic birds and beasts and other semi-mythical beings. The tiredness which for so long had remained incipient became overwhelming. My eyelids slipped shut and I fell into dreams seamed through with some elusive logic.

'I moved through several layers. In the first, the images and feelings were disordered fragments of my journey to this place: the man on the ridge at Gallipoli, my bandit escorts, the grey mountain peaks, the turquoise lake, the dark confines of the prison-camp, the red-and-black hell of the trenches. Images of the trenches had pursued my nights unremittingly for months on end. Now they were muted, as though I had not been personally involved. It was like watching a silent, monochrome newsreel.

'Gradually these visions faded away and in their place, came sensations from home, from this land of ours. Its bubbling streams, long grass burned by the English sun to a ripe gold, the sound of a wooden boat rocking against a decaying wharf. The smell of lichen and moss, the taste of barley in the wind after the scythe-men had swept through the fields, the incomparable bruising of the plough against one's shoulder, the smooth frequency of its transfiguring violation of the soil. The feel of the hot sky on the skin of my back. The smell of sweat. The sound of a jig eddying from across the valley. The groan of a tree as it falls to the ground. Yes, and you, Edward, long before you became a vicar of Christ, your face, that smile of yours, intense, yet shifting. And Caroline, in the days when she was beyond beauty, in a place where love can draw a man into a terror from which he must either escape and never return, or else to which he must succumb wholly, body, mind and soul. The silence which was in her. Her serenity.

'And it was in this almost angelic form that she descended upon me, that day, in that ancient church. From the roof of the place, she descended upon me as a fearsome archangel of light, like Michael of the Sword, or the one who was greater than Michael. All I could hear was the sound of monks chanting in some ancient Germanic tongue.

'When I awoke, it was still night. A moon must have risen, because the whole interior of the church was clearly visible. I was so weak and cold that I could not have moved from where I lay and so I simply gazed up at the scene which unfolded above me. Now, instead of the carvings, there was an enormous map. It was not that the gargoyles and other strange creatures, the fronds, fruits and flowers had vanished; they were there as solidly as before, but the lines and curves, the slopes and dingles formed by their solidity now seemed to lift from the dark surfaces of the wooden beams and to form a hovering structure of its own, separate from the roof. It was an ancient map, drawn in the manner of those times when the unknown stretches were marked with incendiary dragons and horn'd beasts of the sea. And as the giant chart seemed to occupy the entire church, it also came to fill my motionless body. The lines drawn upon the stone by my arms and legs and by the arcs of my skull and ribs and pelvis and the shadowy notion, around these, of my flesh, all of it had become merely a part of the great cartograph which had descended as though from the night sky.

'Through the door of the church flowed the River Rother, its source lost in darkness, while above the altar lay the Hills above Arun Water. The stone convolutions around the chancel rose window now marked the seashore of my beloved English Channel. There were no towns on this map, no signs of human activity. I became part of the map of Old Sussex. Saelig Sussex. The Holy Land of the South Saxons. And within the contours of this land, along the banks of its rivers, upon the slopes of its hills, amongst

the broken scree of its shore, there lay the patterns of my life, the architecture of my being. In the rocks of this unbroken, holy earth, there breathed the music of empty space.

‘And then, as I faded once again into a fitful sleep and into the sound of chanting, the map, the roof, became the face of Caroline. She was the reason I had ended up in that place. It was for the love of her I went to war, willing to give up my life because I knew that I would never be able to dwell within the beauty of her being. You, Edward, had poisoned everything that once existed between us.

‘Now she came to me, no longer the Caroline of flesh-and-blood, nor yet the Caroline of my dream. I cannot explain this: it was her, and yet it was not her. It might have been the face of any woman, in any time. Can

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you understand that? It was like one of those faces of the Madonna. They must have belonged to real women, yet they seem so stylised and anonymous.

‘Afterwards, when I wondered whether I might have hallucinated the whole episode, it came to me that Caroline’s face – the face, Edward, that you and I both knew so well – had become synonymous with... no, had become indistinguishable from the beatified visage of Saint Cecilia of Callistus. This was the presence I felt there, those were the arms which bore me to a side-chapel where I was given small amounts of water and later, bread and cheese.

‘When finally I awoke, three days and nights had passed since I had been brought to the church. I was rescued by some Laz fishermen who had spotted a light in the church and decided to investigate. In my very broken Turkish, I learned that when the first two men had pushed open the narthex door, they saw a woman’s figure bending over my body. However, as soon as they had moved into the nave, they saw that it had been an illusion created by the position of the altar, combined with the reflection of the moon on the gold of the mosaics.

‘I stayed in the Laz village until I grew strong enough to travel. Then, riding on a mule, I trekked across the lower slopes of the Caucasus Mountains until I reached the Aras River. There I was yet again held by a small group of Turkish soldiers, who fancied themselves as border guards. I was eventually rescued by some fleeing White Russians. My Turkish guards thought that they had come to attack the imploding Empire and so they ran away – presumably unaware that Lenin had pulled Russia out of the war. It was chaos. The Russians insisted that I accompany them through the snows and wastes of eastern Anatolia and help with menial tasks. The officers reminded me of ballet-dancers left hopelessly down on their luck, while the men had those rugged, determined faces one saw, much later, on Bolshevik stamps. In their eyes, they held the dusty madness of vast empty spaces. They were not Royalists – only a few months earlier, they had taken part in the February Revolution – but they had been forced out of their army units by the Bolsheviks.’

‘I know this story,’ Edward said, ‘all except for the mysterious bearded man and the church on the island. I can’t think why you haven’t mentioned them before.’

‘I have not yet told you all that I know. It is mine to tell, and I will tell

it in my time.'

'Go on then.'

'After six months or so, I crossed the English Channel. The Armistice had been signed some weeks earlier by the same epauletted fools who had started it all in the first place. When I got home, everything had changed.'

Rotherfield shot Edward a bitter look.

'She did grieve for you.'

'She married the lawyer, far more suitable than a lowly woodcutter, I'm sure you and her father agreed there!'

'What could she have done? She thought you were dead.'

'And she didn't marry you.'

'She never loved me.'

'But you encouraged her to marry the lawyer.'

'I wanted nothing but her happiness.'

'You wanted to make certain that if I did return, she would be beyond my reach. If you couldn't have her, I wasn't going to have her either. You couldn't bear the thought of her giving her love to anyone else. And perhaps she was afraid of your intensity, your possessiveness. The lawyer was an easy way out, for her and for you.'

'Those were difficult times, John.'

'During those two long years, I constantly asked myself why I had not died like the others. I dreamed of her hair, like wheat, falling around my shoulders. The sapphire of her eyes hunted the sleep from my brain and I would hear her voice in the song-patterns of the rain. I could trace out her features in the sky. Yet she wasted no time. And you encouraged her. You opened the way.'

The breeze got up and flipped over some of the pages of the book.

'You were my only friends. You and she.'

'You wished your friend dead.'

'Never.'

'Look into my eyes and tell me that. Put your hand on your holy book and swear to the god whom you believe died for you, and tell me that. And tell her, too.'

The breeze sifted through more of the pages and Reverend Synnott reached over and picked up the book. Steadying his left hand against the edge of the table, with his right he flicked through chapter after chapter, not really reading any of the words. The movement of the pages seemed to him like the motion of birds' wings.

Without raising his eyes, he spoke nervously.

'I will do no such thing. The very fact that you doubt me... You've never said these things before in all these years. I am not perfect. I never pretended that I was.'

There was a lull, which seemed to both men somehow unnatural, until they realised that the daytime birds had fallen silent and the night birds had not yet arisen. Rotherfield refilled his own glass and swigged down the draught. To occupy this silence, and because he could think of nothing better to do, Edward began to read again.

*The next set of manuscripts were discovered by the author near the base of the pyramidal tomb and had been somewhat damaged by moisture rising from the earth. Moreover, since they were of vellum, they had begun to swell and putrefy, so that as they were removed (with the greatest of care*

*and attention), they resembled nothing more than those ballooning pantaloons known as 'galligaskins' which swath'd the hips of the fashionable around the year 1600. Such observation is notable in this context because the forthcoming section of text, although penned in archaic Black Letter, was created within the desmesne of that era.*

*Tis pon the first day of May's ship  
That lovers fair do dance and drink  
Of nectar rose and mandrake form  
And with joyfull sadness through mother's belly  
The dead raise hands in adze blade:  
One sawyer, joined by a second, becometh oratory!  
Then in southerly parts by Englande's white shore  
A gentle man doth pine by window-frame  
For the maiden whose feet doth seam cross stone and sand  
And whose smile like lune, half-risen, doth clasp his soul  
In bounteous torment.  
Yet like the moon, she flieth far beyond his grasp  
And ever will remain so, till Day of Doom come to pass.*

In the laste yeare of the reign of Goode Queene Bess, moste deare depart'd from this toil'd earth, didst live in landes to south of Wywurth one Lord Thomas Birkin. Lord Thomas, fair-of-face and scion of baronet, a man pass'd youth yet in action aged not, was not bethroth'd for reason of his master's debts. Lord Thomas dwelt within the pages of his books, the loose scrolls of manuscripts anciente and of planns formulated by the hands of monks long-earth'd. His hair grew wild and he lived on stale ale and currants red and blacke, and stole the occasional hog from the merchant farmer whose lande adjoined that of his lord. Thomas was wont to pass many a night singing, with voice more beauteous than that of the galingale, in the long gallerie of his father's mansion.

One such evening,  
Anne, the daughter of Caburn the Joyner, was passing by.  
'What's this I hear?' she said, in voice low and strong. 'A nightjar, or a thorn'd breast? Tis hard to tell, in these days of vers'd love. The young lord must be in love's state most dire, yet his his love hath no object, his adze no timber to carve. What if I, like feather into pillow, mighte slip myself into his inner courte. Then mighte we be recompens'd for the day when the Baronet Birkin did caste from the lande our familie and many another whose forebears' bones have lain within't since ancient times. This loss hath plagued my deare father and made our lives vinegar and pewter. T' would indeed be a revenge grac'd with winter parlour galingale and metheglin!'

Scheming so, did Anne secrete her load of forest gatherings and contrive to porte herself, barefoot, to the lower roof of the Birkin mansion, where she didst proceed to dance in manner moste elegant and when through his fulle glass window, the Lord Birkin did spie her, he did grow transfix'd. With a great sigh did he thrust open the window and resume his song and though Anne did spie her long-haired lord she did assume that pretence of blindness which joyners' daughters porte like woollen biggen and with arm arch'd long akin to yew bow, did she lifte the white cap from her pate and fling it in direction of its moon simulacrum. Her hair was longe and

blacke and curious combed and plaited and flowed about her person as the waves of the night sea. Grammar, logic, rhetoric – trivium all – and yet more, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, quadrivium moste fine, all of these did shifte within the breaste of the unshaven Thomas. From that moment on, he resolved to dwelle within the love of this faery, to raise oak pon stone base, to seed garth among rank weed and with everie breath, to turn the great wheele of the post mill in the compass of the stars.

When he ope'd his eyes, the forme moste delirious had vanished and the nighte was blacker than ever. Yet within the longe gallerie of his forefathers, Thomas Birkin was akin to flame or sea-gust. He left his manuscripts as they lay, pon the broad hardbeam, went back to his bed-chamber from whence he gathered up his chattels and made off into the foreste of the May nighte.

But she was gone into air, and gaze as he mighte pon the flat spann of the foreste lake, Thomas could not conjure the face of the one he loved, any more than he might the words of the dead. The whole of the nighte did he sojourn there, yet she did not return and as dawn's mournful light waxed over the lande, the lord's son return'd unto his chamber where he slumber'd, restless and alone.

The next nighte, he did hang pon the likeness of her forme, gazing and singing into ayre's darkness over the empty roof till the moon had set behind the brow of the hill. For hours longe did fine Thomas tarry, sat pon the great chimney stack, yet still no sign of his belov'd; not e'en the faintest breath rippl'd through night's skin. The young lord was newly fayre shav'n and bedeck'd withe pokestick cambric, perfum'd leather cloak and heel'd shoes of the newest kinde, readied for to dance to the rosin'd wheele of the heavens. Just when he felt sleep rush over his mind, there stood his love of one globe turn. The joyner's daughter appeared to him as a bud from the lower garths of paradise.

'Thou art the moste perfecte being,' he said aloud.

'Sir,' she gave reply, 'how canst thou saye such a thing, for I am onlie the joyner's daughter and my mother was the daughter of the miller who dwelleth in the wheeling oak poste-mill. The winds have not filled her sails for many a year and we are off to the filthe and labyrinth of the towne, in quest if not for silver, then at leaste for pewter's bite. You, sir, are a noble lord.'

'I care not, good lady, for the stops and kayles of this world, nor for farthingales and fore-smocks. Verily. I would make common cause with a joyner's daughter or a millers' grand-daughter, if you be she, as I would with mine owne salvation.'

The Maid Anne took Lord Birkin's hand and they did dance for hourupon-hour as the moon rose and fell and still they danc'd, 'The Lusty Gallante', 'The Pepper's Blacke' and 'The Shakinge of the Sheets' until the verie stars in the firmament didst gather together closer than is naturale in these times and confere as in manner of old. The laste dance they did dance was 'The Vicar of St Fool's'.

The air was warm and hour-by-hour did they dance off their accoutrements until they were bared to the nighte, and still they danced. The maid's hair, which at first trip had been curl'd high and dressed with bejewell'd caul and French hoode, now windblowne and free, wove about her neck

and shoulders. And her Lord's long hair mingled in manner moste strange with that of his angel. Any evil thoughte in their beings was drawn out, good and true, by the fire which swept o'er them. And they were like the seeds of the fig-tree spawn'd by Solomon's Brothers. And with the rootes of the figgy green tree, their love grew along paths moste dark and unknow'd e'en to themselves. The wartes of their soules were pierced as though by lances; the boulders of their guts were rolled into sand; the sap colours of their heart, wound longe pon the skins of young bulls, told of plays and tales and poemes of love and death and musick. Then they lay together beneath the heavens and she remember'd her scheme and he, his vellum, but yet they did bring those geometers to minde merely as past course, longe caste asunder from the mainmast of the vessel pon which they did sail. From the Great Hall of the house, did they hear musick of kinde moste exquisite and beauteous, a fantasie issuinge forth from the stringes and tunnels of lute, pandora, cittern, recorder and viol, as composed by those archangels of Orpheus, Byrd, Bull and Gibbons. And as the lovers felt the musick in their bodies, they fancied they could heare, issuinge from far off on the foreste lake, the cry of a white swann. And then the sounde of the instruments faded, for though moste fayre and beauteous, all such are merely tools carv'd pon th'ends of fingers imperfect, while the voice of man or beaste be created in miraculous manner moste true by the breath of Almightye God. And so, as dawn's pale sword emerg'd from the blacke waters of the voide, so did there strike up a swann madrigal such as had ne'er before been heard, and Thomas turn'd towards his dream of twin nightes and address'd her, thus:

'Mie love, thou art indeede a flow'ring garden, come late to mie life.  
So it is I wonder if in truthe, whether this existence  
hath reach'd its apogee and my soule returnst unto Paradise bosom.'

And she didst replie in like manner:

'My lorde and master, it doth render great joye unto the bosom  
of this poor and rank'd place in which thou hast dwelt  
these mirror'd nightes neare past.

That a noble lorde as thysel with lineage skin to the knight-errants of  
olde

Should deign to slip his hande into this poor and untutor'd palm  
Like that of lily-finger'd lutenist into horrid hair of pigstie,  
Issuinge from this union moste strange and high in sense of being  
Pon the verie roof, a love moste pure and goode that swanns unblemish'd  
Do wake before God's allotted hour and sing His praise  
As though t'were our Spem in alium.'

His surprise was yet of no-surprise:

'How com'st thou, a simple tradesman's daughter,  
To know of Tallis and musick that twere compos'd some fifty years to  
thy rear?'

She laughed the laugh of a joyner's scion and to him replied:

'Sir, tis thine owne musick that doste sweet'n my rear  
That bringeth forth such delectes of the voice and the heart!  
Tis this goode alchemical magicke moste pure and holie  
That dost banish all evil thoughte and mode from this minde of mine  
And raise the ayre of our union to madrigal of all nature.'

And Lord Thomas didst engage withe her in this manner:

'But what evil, my love, can there be in this, thy breast of rime pure

Caste from Heav'n's frame?  
 And she turn'd away her fine-bon'd face as poste-mill spun pon breeze,  
 'I cannot saye that which has slow'd in oxbow dregs  
 To pile as weed and murd'rous stem  
 Suffice to know thou that in this nighte's oaken embrace  
 Hast this poor soul begg'd repentance reale and bloodied.  
 For the joyner's daughter would ne'er breathe ill pon thy fayre  
 countenance  
 Any more than she would pon her babe, not yet borne.'  
 He pulled her forme towards his lips, but not for kisses sweet.  
 'What is this thou saye? Babe, not yet borne?'  
 'I do speak in figure, my lorde,  
 As thrice-blown octave doth wheele into pentacle,  
 And as spring heaveth into summer's fierie passage.'  
 He gave her arm release, and sighed longe into the darkness.  
 'Tis good, thou speaketh in ayre and madrigal, and not in riddle and  
 maze moste devilish,  
 For tis the wierd of a good man to lose track and rope to Paradise  
 When caressed in th'arms of a counterfeit!  
 She spake through stale ale breeze, which caused his bodie to shiver and  
 shudder:  
 'I am no simulacrum, mie goode lorde! My love for thee is true!  
 And he in loving embrace did gather her tresses,  
 Blacke and twyn'd like bend and flow of stream moste ancient,  
 And whisper'd such wordlings in her lug that she didst blush and  
 tremble  
 Since the memorie of her maidenhood was set in vellum muscle of her  
 heart,  
 And Goode Anne of the Poste-Mill did lifte herself, more seraphim  
 than succubous  
 And rais'd her throate, her mane, like laste of Philomele, jug, jug, tereu!  
 So that all the byrdes of foreste and lake did awaken and flutter and  
 swish, blood-red  
 Around the rose-stemmed limbs of the two whose breathe and beat  
 like leaf and stem  
 Didst arise but from one source, one quill:  
 A barber's lute, a chest of viols, thy love and dance spreadeth like a  
 wave  
 O'er this newly-warm'd lande,  
 Rememb'r'd by the Lorde in spann of one nighte and one moon  
 Thy madrigal, ayre and fantasie playeth as one note, which sayeth:  
 Remember nothing! But this: That o'er the tenebrous waves of death's  
 longe river  
 There are many burninge lamps which light the waye; yet none is  
 greater  
 Than the lighte of the sky which doth proclaim the olde at an ende  
 And the rise of Love's Queendom pon all, stone and glistening lip of  
 daye.

And so singing, they didst love again as the lande didst awaken into  
 breathe and songe of summer's morn, after which, to scape arch'd houndes  
 and falcones of the hunte so plann'd, she didst hasten away. The next  
 nighte, the third of those related in this passage, the Goode Maid Anne

did not come to the Lorde Birkin, though once, as midnight struck iron, he did fancie that he smell'd her skin, like flower'd verse of poesy petal, brush gainst his nare. Nor did she come unto him on the next yet, nor the one after that, and he grew thin and lived once again in his bed-chamber, but now he hadst not e'en his manuscripts from which to drawe succour. As winter fell upon the lande of Sussex, so did the foreste lake by Jacob's Poste freeze o'er and when the bedraggl'd lorde didst venture one morn to walk pon the water of the pond, he sat and brushed away the powder of snow and he remembered the nighte he had danced with the maid moste fayre and he remembered her skin which was softe as the snow pon his and he caste in minde her e'en which were bluer than the face of the winter sky mirror'd in the lake. He broughte to minde the legend of Birkin Hall, which tolde of a skulle most horride that did emerge from the old priesthole on certain nightes, but onlie to those besott'd heavily with the musk of love, those drawn upwards in tall reveries of musick, or else those verie neare to deathe, the three states thus apportion'd being closer to one another than skin be to bone. The skulle was said to be that of some longedead priest, or monk, or such-like fiend! Thank God! Master Thomas had never set een pon said white ball caput. He gazed at the heavens and then sighed and his sigh blew yet more snow off the clear ice of the pond. He glanced downe into the darkness of the lake. Rising from the darkness, as on that first nighte of May, he saw her face, whiter than ever before, rising towards his. And beside her face was another, smaller, hairless, and by the cup o' Chanctonbury, the tiny face was that of Thomas Birkin. And verily, his twin love didst make its lips into the shape of a smile, in manner moste akin to that of a lady.

*Author's note: Anne the Joyner's Daughter went from that place and sat by the forest lake, gazing into the water as dawn filtered across the sky. Soon after, she found that she was great with child and some months later, she went to live with her grandfather, the miller, and her child was born into this world of betrayals.*

Though nightly he waited upon his roof and many times sat by the pond during the years that followed, Lord Thomas Birkin never again saw the joiner's daughter.

In his dotage, when the Roundheads came to sack what was left of Birkin Mansion, they found him naked and almost blind, lying half-dead by the window of his bed-chamber, clutching a bundle of dirty rags. When their New Model Commander investigated further, he found, wrapped in the bundle of rags, a lock of fine, black hair which was not dirty at all, but gleaming and fresh as the night it had been severed. The old man gazed up at the cuirass'd Roundhead Officer and thought he saw something familiar to his recognition, but though he tried hard, he could not make out the face.

The vicar laid down the book.

'I think it's time we parted for the night.'

Rotherfield shook his head, slowly.

'I want to hear more and besides, I want to pluck and eat a fig or two.'

'The fig-tree is out of season,' Edward said, 'has been, for years.'

But already, Rotherfield had arisen and stepped outside the gate. For

half a minute or so he remained out of sight behind the high stone wall, searching the wizened branches for fruit.

The Reverend Edward Synnott leaned back against the wicker of his chair and closed his eyes. The port had mulled itself through the fibres and convolutions of his brain so that behind his clasped lids, he felt a sensation like mild giddiness, a subtle shift in space and time which one might feel in the midst of a dream. From somewhere in the forest came the high-pitched warbling of a nightingale. His ears had grown accustomed to the noises of the woods, the steady, pulsatile flow of the river and the soft friction of the leaves, the random interruptions by owls, nightjars and sleek-backed rodents scurrying through the undergrowth. He had sat on this chair each evening and listened for close on fifty years. The sequence of notes varied, subtle differences growing as the night wore on, until it was these unrepeated tones, and his silent anticipation of their arrival, that came to define the entire symphony. And tonight, Edward felt that the substance of his brain had grown to be like that of an animal and that he was receptive to absolutely everything that was occurring, or even which might yet occur, within the body of the forest. Night was his time. The separate tenebrosities held between the pages of the books in his library, each one an individual darkness, or the silent wind within an organ-pipe, or the unseen whorl in the wood of a living tree. They had sung to one another all night, yet somewhere in that warm August blackness Edward had lost the other two, had lost them forever. And it had been as though he had lost his own soul.

‘See – I found some! Three, actually; small, but definitely edible.’

Rotherfield was standing above him, his six-foot frame blanking out the constellations.

The figs were the size of nightingale’s heads, and livid green as though the inner substance of the fruit had been sucked through the integument. Without thinking, Edward accepted one. It felt soft and downy in his palm and through the skin it was as if he detected a faint pulse. He dismissed the thought.

‘You’re sure it’s alright to eat?’

Rotherfield made no response.

Edward felt the architecture of the night becoming distinctly oppressive.

Quickly, he bit into the fig.

The fruit was gritty between his teeth and tasted slightly pungent, though not unpleasantly so. Edward chewed slowly.

‘You’re not hungry?’

Rotherfield shook his head.

‘I want to hear the next section. I want to hear the end.’

Edward sighed and a shiver coursed through his body, which reminded him of the pressure of his back against the wood as the boat had moved gently through the black water.

‘Look, why don’t you read it for yourself? I’ll lend it to you,’ he said.

‘I had my fill in Anatolia.’

‘Of figs...?’

‘They grew on the hillsides. The White Russian platoon virtually lived on them. That, flat-bread and yoghurt.’

‘There are worse things to live on.’

‘I followed the man with the face.’

‘Man with the face...?’

'I tracked down the address on the card he gave me to a derelict house on a backstreet of Constantinople. The door was not been securely fastened and I broke in without difficulty. It was one of those tall buildings with a central courtyard and barred street-windows. On the top floor I found a pile of ancient manuscripts written in languages I had no hope of comprehending.'

'The tongues of the dead sing on through eternity.'

'Somehow, I knew with certainty that these drawings and texts represented the combined wisdom of Alexandria and Baghdad. The Bibliothèque of Baghdad, with its twelve thousand volumes, much of the learning of the ancient and mediaeval worlds, was flooded by the terrible nicor, the brother of the first and greatest of the Mongol Khans, and a sizeable proportion of the people of that city having sought refuge in the subterranean plexus, suffered the same fate as their books. I could see all this in the old vellum manuscripts, just as I had seen the map of my homeland in the dark roof-beams of that octagonal church on the island. I resolved to remove these manuscripts to a safe place known only to myself. I knew that I had been guided here for a purpose. The last page I looked at bore the semblance of a face. I felt I had known for thousands of years. It was the face of Sinan the Architect, who centuries earlier had built mosques in the shape of poems. Seeing his imprint there, in the filtered half-light which rose from the surface of the Bosphorus waters, I understood that I, too was part of a long poem, of whose verses we only ever catch faint glimpses such as this.

'The number of manuscripts was so great, I decided to return the next day with cart and horse. Which I did. But I was unable to find the house again. Perhaps it had never existed. I scoured the streets of Constantinople, but found not a trace of those miraculous drawings, musical notations and Dark Letter texts which I had touched with my own hands. I had now lost two loves in my life, and wandered through the city streets of Old Byzantium, half-crazed on aniseed liquor, until I collapsed from total exhaustion. I awoke, days later, in a madrasah, where the students did their best to heal me.

'The day before I was due to leave, they took me into a room without windows, empty except for a life-size brass head. They said it was a replica of the head of Khizr-the-Green, who had only ever appeared in spirit form to poets, saints and prophets. And there, before my eyes, they performed some incantations and they made the head talk. The language was Turkish, so I got a few words. A noun, a verb, a phrase, nothing coherent. Something about a mill shaped like a mosque and a long ship and a lake.'

'How odd.' Edward looked sceptical.

'I know what I experienced. It was something from ancient times. The brass head was hairless. It opened its eyes and parted its brass lips and talked for about twelve hours; it emerged from silence in daylight and when it sank back again into dumb metal it was day once more. This was no dream, nor anything I previously understood as reality.'

This last was uttered in a whisper and now Rotherfield paused and closed his eyes. Edward could see the globes slip and dance beneath the skin of the lids, so that after a while, each began to resemble a tiny brass head. And then the whole integument seemed to be inordinately stretched across the bone of the woodcutter's skull and his silvery hair was akin to strands growing lank from the scalp of a corpse. Edward shuddered and

blinked to dispel the image. When he looked again, Rotherfield was staring at him.

'I live with this knowledge, that once I touched upon the greatest of all treasures, the language which lies beneath all languages, and that its secrets are lost to me. I have cut wood since that day. I have searched for the beauty of line and the music that lies in the creation of silence. I have searched for love through other means. So read on, and since you are in part the cause of all of this, then sing the words which the author of this small tome has penned; whether they be false or true, we will listen.'

The vicar's face grew pale as the falling moon. Automatically, he picked up the book and began to intone the words which his eyes followed, tracing out the architecture of letter, phrase, sentence, as though he were reciting a passage from the Holy Book.

He felt as if he had not space enough in his body to breathe. In the shallow boat, that night beneath the new moon, Edward Synnott held his breath until the moment he knew that he would burst into fragments of himself and scatter across the streams and forests and lakes of old Sussex. And as for the other two, since he could no longer see them, he listened for the sound of their breathing. He became dizzy and fell asleep and when he awoke, his companions had gone. He rode on the current until he spotted an oxbow and steered towards it, using the small tiller at the stern. He was about to leap out of the boat onto the dry bank, when he heard a sound coming from the river. Afterwards he thought it had sounded more like a song but at the time he wasn't certain. He had thrust his body back down into the stinking belly of the boat, the better to listen.

*This is the account given by a certain Curate Johnson of the village of Wywurth regarding an incident which was said to have occurred, during the late summer in the Year of Our Lord, 1881. The original manuscript was discovered in an empty bottle of porter found at low tide, lodged in one of the sea-caves, which, once every twelve hours, form the most extrematous parts of this ancient land of Sussex. At first, though no liquid was found in the bottle, the ink seemed to have faded away, so that to the curator of the local history museum the yellowed paper resembled vellum. When placed in complete darkness, however (and this is attested to by the curator, three local councillors and the Grand Master of Wywurth Masonic Lodge), the ink, which later was found to have been drawn somehow from the sap of the fig-tree, gradually became visible once again; and thus was the account deciphered and committed to print by these officials. Oddly, when the scroll was subjected to daylight, or even to artificial light, the writing evanesced again, only to re-appear when placed in the dark room.*

'That cannot be,' cut in Rotherfield. 'How could they have read it, if they were in complete darkness?'

The vicar shrugged.

'Perhaps one of them was blind, and could decipher the course of the ink by touch.'

'Hah! Very likely! Typical theological dissimulation.'

'Shall I continue?'

'Yes, yes. Go on.'

*The manuscript remained in Wywurth Local Museum until 1940 when, as a matter of security, it was removed to a place of greater safety. Since the*

*related paperwork was destroyed during the war, the fate of the so-called Saelig Manuscript (sometimes also known as The Daughter of the Wind) is now unknown. There have been reported sightings from as far afield as Azerbaijan, Pantelleria and Odessa, but the author has no means of verifying these alleged sightings. The sections which appear in this book constitute, in part, translated copies from the original manuscript, but since the author was unable to complete this process, he has had to rely on his memory and on accounts related to him by various country folk. Unreliable as they may be, they are reproduced in seamless manner, because the author believes that oral histories hold deeper truths than has ever been possible with the written word.*

I, who do go by the name of Henry Francis Johnson, am curate of this ancient parish to the good vicar known around these parts (and no doubt also in the parts hereabouts) as ‘the hunting parson’, the Reverend Brightling Fulthrope. I am not an educated man, that is, I am not overly-educated like our good Vicar Fulthrope, yet I did attend the Dame School and am school’d by mine own good hand, and I do know of life’s vicissitudes to the span of any man in this short sparrow’s flutter. Herein does this poor, mortal hand relate a tale of absolute and wondrous verity which did manifest as happenings one summer’s night and day, some seven years ago this Lammas.

A sight most common around these parts is that of a tallship wi’ topgallants fluttering along the line of the horizon like the great wings of an albatross. In one day’s span, they cross the edge of our world and then vanish as though they had never been. On this Lammas Eve of which I write, the wind had dropped so low that the sea was more akin to lake than ocean. It was as though for the full twenty-four hour, the incoming tide did not turn. The ship sailed in the Devil’s direction, from west to east, but barely had it reached one third of the way across this line of coast, when it seemed becalmed and moved no more.

I was busy attending to St Cuthman’s. The tower was the oldest part of the building and had carried heavenwards the prayers of thousands of folk, rich, poor, learned and illiterate; it had survived Dissolution and Reformation, Civil War and the shadow of Boney’s fleet. But now, without the attention of a master stonemason, there was little doubt that it would not retain its current form beyond the end of this century. The bells, in particular, were in dire need of repair; they had been forged of iron in Saxon the ringers be bursting with barrel liquor) of their coming loose and tumbling upon all and sundry was not so very far from truth’s oratory.

Though the shadows were growing long over our small parish, the wind still had not got up and the sea remained becalmed. As I walked towards my humble dwelling at the opposite pole of the village from St Cuthman’s, I saw that the ship had moved not one half of a degree, compass-wise, along the horizon. However, it seemed larger than before and this seemed strange to me, until I realised that in the absence of a prevailing wind, the incoming tide was drawing the vessel straight towards the shore. Though there was no breeze and the Lammas Eve remained warm, yet as I gazed across the darkening waters, I shivered.

I have never married and next Gooding Day, God-willing, shall I reach my sixtieth year. Unless there be a drowning haar over the coast, from the back window of my house it is possible to make out on the Great Hoe,

the Giant Man of the White Way, carved by some pagan ancestor of ours in a time before books, perhaps even before words. To my front is nowt but the sea and the invisible darkness of the French coast. Oftentimes, on Figgy Sunday or All Saints' Eve, have I knelt and prayed out-of-doors, facing southwards, I know not why, and sometimes, though my eyes be closed and my palms clasped in reverence of our Saviour, yet I find that I can see, as through an elder copse, things which in this physical world of ours remain invisible. On one such night, I did see the Bendin-in of the great mackerel nets. Though, in my reverie, Vicar Fulthrope did bless those nets and the fishermen who cast them on the waves, yet the corks which kept the long webs afloat and concertina'd through the water, all of a sudden changed into bones. The mackerel, which danced in the thousand, turned from silver to red and the bread, cheese and beer of celebration lay uneaten on the beach.

The very next day, a great storm did blow up and all but one of the fishing-boats sank, with the loss of twenty men, some of whom had reached to within a few yards of the shoreline. Though God be in everything, yet sometimes, I think that the sea is without God. Please do not suppose that I myself am mired in those peasant fears which, this past fifty year or more, have been banished from the heads at least of those who have letter. Though I be but a lowly official in this very ancient Church, I am yet one for science and the new ways of thinking: I have seen too many of our poorer folk shackled like pack animals to superstitions. I carry no shepherd's crown in my pocket. On no occasion have I so much as drawn breath on these matters in the presence of the Reverend Fulthrope, who is most opposed to such wantonness of the spirit in his parishioners. All is best left to the Almighty, who will see all books balance justly on the Ultimate Day. Nonetheless, as I listened to the water lapping on the stony shore, I fancied that I could make out the creaking of the ship's ropes and timbers and I had the queerest apprehension of some dreadful misadventure hanging like the shadow of the new moon. I drew my cassock around my waist and hurried home and drank a jug of hot, spiced ale, that my sleep pass without fancy.

I was woken from darkness by the sound of banging. I thought one of the shutters had come loose, so in night-dress, and porting pewter-andcandle, I went out to make certain. One shutter had indeed come away from its fastening and I battened it back down. Since the night was warm and windless, it struck me as odd that a shutter should have come loose. My candle fluttered. I held my breath. A pale moth crossed my path. The sea was dark and heaving and there was no moon. I let my breath run out into the darkness. There was a hand on my shoulder. Sharp, cold, bony. I dropped the pewter. The candle rolled along the ground, came to a stop and sputtered, but did not go out. Prayer would not come. I turned around. Stepped back, a cist-length. My eyes had not yet grown accustomed to the pitch black of the night, but I was just able to see the top half of a man's face, disembodied, floating. Then I realised that a black scarf was wound around his mouth and nose. I was able to discern that he was tall, clad all in black and that his limbs hung somewhat loosely about his frame. He was slightly breathless. His hair was bound in a second scarf. 'Curate Johnson, I'm darned sorry to wake ye, sir. I didn't intend to scare ye.'

‘You know my name?’

‘Never mind about that, sir. Just a-mind what I say. There’ll be no harm comin to thy good self nor to any body on this night’s world.’

His voice was not familiar to me. I know all the parishioners of Wywurch and most of them in the hamlets round abouts, too and yet, there was something about his form, there, in the summer darkness...

‘I knocked on thy door, good curate, but thee must’ve bin good and truly clasp’d in sleep’s swarthy arms, for thou didst not awaken. So I was a’tryin to tap on the glass of yon window.’

‘What do you want, man, at this ungodly hour?’

He stepped towards me. I moved back, but halted when I felt against my bare heels the beginnings of the slope which led from my cottage down to the sea’s edge. He held up his hand.

‘Don’t thee fret, now. It’s just we want ye to cast open the doors a’ the church a’ Saint Cuthman’s for the night.’

‘What do you want with the church? There is no lead on its roof, and precious little gold on the altar. Just a few flowers and some old hymnbooks.’

‘Never you mind on that. Just bring with ye the keys an come wi me.’

So I went indoors, quickly changed my clothes and drew down the heavy, iron key-ring from its hook above the fireplace.

I had taken care seldom to have been in St Cuthman’s alone at night.

Mark you, as I said earlier, I’m not a superstitious man, but there are limits and the brain is a funny thing once it gets going. By the Lord, even our own minds are not within our control!

The place smelt as though it had been closed, not for the few hours since I had locked up earlier that evening, but for centuries. I knew the interior of St Cuthman’s like my own hand, yet somehow, on this night out-of-joint, everything seemed unfamiliar. I wondered whether I might be dreaming – the ale had been good and strong – but the night air on my face had been too real and the oak doors of the church had been still warm from the sun’s touch. And there was something else. At the insistence of my ‘guest’ we had taken a circuitous route, skirting the field enclosures to the north. On several gateposts were hung linen bags, filled with what looked like large joints of meat and loaves of bread – freshly-baked, I could tell from the odour. My companion had removed these bags and given me some, while he carried others himself, so that by the time we reached the church we both were panting and sweating like dogs.

‘I am not a young man,’ I said, and sat down in the nearest pew.

How strange the place looked! The altar was half-hidden in shadow, while to north and south the transepts were carved hulking things, more Saxon in style than truly English. There had been an old Saxon church on the site of St Cuthman’s, but that had been burned down during the Danish raids many centuries ago and of the original, only the tower and bells remained. No-one ever ventured up the tower after dark; apart from the rational danger of losing one’s step and falling, there was a story concerning a haunting by a White Friar who was reputed to appear on particular dates in the old ecclesiastical calendar. Apparently this monk did no-one any harm, but simply wrote all night at high speed using a metal stylus or such-like. In the morning, scrolls of vellum had been found blowing across the floorboards of the belfry of the tower. I have never seen any of these; over the years, successive vicars are said to have burned them in secret. I do not believe in this rubbish, and I repeat it here merely to illustrate

the point that, especially for a country person, as my companion most certainly was, to be venturing in the old church at this hour on Lammas Eve meant something very untoward was going on, here, in this village of Wywirth where I was born and where, no doubt, in the balm of the soft, sheltered soil of St Cuthman's churchyard, I shall await the universal Resurrection.

The man had not waited with me but had gone on ahead and disappeared behind the High Altar. Suddenly, there were shadows everywhere and the sound of scraping heels and, aye, in that House of God, there was cursing and taking the Name in vain. What seemed to me like hundreds of men, all garbed-up in double scarfs just as the first, were entering through the old doors and heading for the tower, the entrance to which lay behind the high altar. They carried sacks and barrels, some so bulky they had to be hoisted upon two men's shoulders, and beautiful gilt and silver caskets, the like of which I had only ever seen as a child in picture-books of fairy tales. Some of the boxes they carried had stamped on them words in a foreign-looking language. The parts of their faces that I could see were coarse and some bore terrible scars, as if from cattle-brands, across their foreheads. None acknowledged my presence – for which I was moderately grateful – and though I scrutinized them as much as I dared, I was unable to recognise any as being from hereabouts. The largest of the objects which they brought in was an ancient plough, so heavy it took fully twelve men to hoist it onto the chancel floor.

After what seemed like hours, they had all left, apart from one, the man who had made me come here. He now approached me, limping as though from some old injury.

'Good curate, sir, you are free to go – but mind, now, go only the way by which we did arrive here and at all costs avoid the main street of the village.'

I nodded and rose.

'Tomorrow – today – is Sunday,' I said. 'The bell-ringers will be up early to sound the Sabbath and Vicar Fulthrope always inspects the bells before they are rung.'

The sound of the man's laughter echoed like blasphemy through the dark stone church.

'You needs not worry about that,' he said, and though he still wore his scarf I could tell that beneath it he was grinning from ear-to-ear. 'Just say nothing to man nor beast and no harm'll come to you or to nobody. This

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church be a horn a'plenty!'

And so saying, he turned away.

'Wait,' I said. 'I will need to lock up. If I leave it like this, the vicar will ask questions.'

'Just go on home, Mister Curate, and remember this night as a dream. Be thankful I didn't send ye up the tower where the White Friar busies himself.'

'I don't believe in the White Friar,' I snorted. 'That's no more than a tale invented by smugglers to keep good folk away on certain nights.' He came towards me and took hold of my collar with both hands. He was a good six inches taller than I and his breath smelled of red wine and Latakia baccy. His expression had altered. The bonhomie had vanished.

‘Now, don’t you go blabbin about! Don’t you be a damn’d fool!’

He glanced around, as though he was aware of the blasphemy which he had just uttered and which had been absorbed into the sandstone. His next words were just as taut, but spoken in a whisper which was more like a hiss.

‘In a bricked-up priest-hole at foot o’ the tower, there lieth a skeleton which, come Hallows’ Eve, doth talk and sing. No-one goes by the wall there. Tis said by those who sip from Chanctonbury Ring that the cold bones do converse wi’ the bees and that the wing’d ones take the form of a naked young woman and dance a hornpipe on a dead elder branch to the music o’ an invisible, devilish fiddle! Tis said that the Queen o’ the Beggars is married on a black river barge to the King o’ the Rooks and that the ghostly choirs o’ Didling do sing full-throated at the walls.’

He was working himself up into a frenzy and his body was shaking all over. I noticed that he had cut himself just above the left eye. It was not a deep cut but it had bled and the blood was freshly crusted over.

‘Would you let go of my coat, please?’

Slowly, he relaxed his grip. His hands fell to his sides and he slumped like a pig’s bladder in that Heaven-and-Hell game where all the village fight over a ball, running and falling and wrestling for miles through the wealden clay. I knew then that he, too, was not a young man and, moreover, that he had led a life of dissolution.

‘Tis harder for us land smugglers than for the ones who wade aboard ships. We are more like to be caught. There are precious few watchmen in the sea.’

‘Why d’you do it?’

‘There’s always the possibility that we might strike gold. Besides, everyone needs to eat. E’en a curate!’

‘Yes, but we all have God.’

‘I never once saw God put bread into a starving bairn’s mouth. Never once.’

‘There are honest ways of earning a living. Millions do it.’

‘Millions are slaves.’

‘And you? You are free?’

He sighed, and his scarf blew outward from his face in the shape of a cloud over a hillock.

‘Beneath the life which you see, there is another life and beneath that, another, and so on, until, like the great traveller, you ask yourself, what is this life, but the thinnest film on the surface of a lake, blown away as easily as by the flap of a dragonfly’s wing?’

He stopped talking and the silence of the ancient church swamped everything; pews, transept, altar, vestry; and its source was the door, hidden in darkness, which led to the tower. I felt the centuries pile with the corpses into the wooden pews, those upturned faces, illumined through the bodies of stained-glass saints. Bearded Saxon kings, transported miraculously to Golgotha hill. Forgotten music lingered in the blown sand images, in the creeping of the tides, in the scratch of stylus on skin.

I whispered, ‘Who are you?’

The man receded into the shadows. I wasn’t sure whether it was I who had stepped back, or he who had moved closer to the altar. I could no longer make out his face.

‘Yesterday, I conversed with the bees and danced with the mackerel

Today, I run with the smugglers. Tomorrow, I will fight in an obscure war in some exotic land.'

'Who are you?' I repeated.

He shook his head, and went behind the High Altar.

I should have turned and left that church which once I thought I knew. I ought to have hurried back to my low cottage and closed the door against the darkness and against all of history's knowledge. I could have buried myself in dreams of another life, or of lives untold. I am a humble man, a curate of the church of St Cuthman's in the village of Wywurch in the Pevensy March of the county of Sussex. My entry is of this world and my exit shall be of the like, of that there is no doubt. Yet perhaps in the life of every man, there is a moment when thought and action become one, where matter and spirit are united for a brief shadow's span beneath the arc of a new moon. Before I could stop myself, I was tearing after him along the cold flags, some of which were the roof-stones of the hollow tombs in the undercroft, and up the tower, up the spiral staircase, now crammed almost full with boxes and crates. It took all my strength to clamber up to the top of the tower. I pushed open the door to the belfry and then, barely pausing to catch my breath, I climbed up the ladder to where the old pig-iron bells swing in the wind.

Up here, there was a chilling breeze which tasted of salt. The floorboards were half-rotten, and I steadied myself against the cold metal arc of one of the bells. At first, I could see nothing, but then as my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, I made out his form, standing by the opening which lay between roof and walls. He was facing away from me and was gazing out over the village and beyond, towards the rustling leaves of the forest, and the lake which lay like a dark eye at the centre of the land. The floor was covered in boxes, crates, cases and sacks of all kinds, some of them stamped across with large letters, black and red and quite unintelligible. I wondered how he had managed to get all the way up the tower and across the pile of smuggled goods so quickly and so easily, but then I supposed that he was used to it, hiding, dodging, dancing. He struck a match and lit a long cigar. The white smoke curled upwards and assumed form most lithe and danced at the belfry window, and I felt a great sadness. He did not turn to face me, but I saw that he had removed both scarves. Long, black hair swirled around him, intertwining with the smoke.

'In the depths of winter, when the lake is frozen over, I can see my own face, rising.'

'You are no smuggler.'

'I have been many things, I have travelled far and wide,' he said and his voice was seamed with emotion. 'And yet, always I return to this place of my beginnings where the words are written in blood and feathers.'

'Does the vicar know of this?'

He laughed. 'The vicar will receive a case of good French wine and a box of fat Cuban cigars. There will be no service today, as he will be ill; nothing serious, he will make a rapid recovery.'

'And this has been happening...'

'For years, good curate. It is an arrangement.'

'I had no idea.'

He spun round. 'You are outside of the text, Curate Johnson. You will die, and when the time comes and your death will be an ordinary one.'

I shuddered. He had shifted his position in manner subtle as a conjuror,

and now was leaning against the massive iron bulk of the major bell. His form did not wholly obscure the bell, however, so large was the holy monster.

‘Not... not tonight?’

He shook his head and I thought I saw the flicker of a smile.

‘You will live awhile yet, I fancy.’

I nodded, more than a little relieved, for that courage which had drawn me up here had quite slipped away.

‘Hidden within a tomb is a casket and in the casket is a head.’

‘A head?’ I repeated.

‘Sometimes the head is of brass, sometimes of flesh and bone. When the time is right, it sings of many things; of that which is past and forgotten and of that which is unknown and yet to come.’

As he spoke these words in a low, almost soporific voice, something odd began to occur around the bell.

I rubbed my eyes in an attempt to clear the image. Yet my vision was quite lucid, as was my mind: this was not a dream. I struggled on.

‘What have you to do with this... this head.’

He had moved back again to the window.

‘I am in the song, nothing more.’

‘You are sung into existence?’

‘As are we all.’

The surface of the iron was changing, shifting, as though it were a plate of molten metal. And in the grey haze thus evinced, I swear I saw the naked form of a woman, tall, and beautiful to behold. She grew larger, until her face filled the image. Suddenly, talking to this strange man seemed the only way for me to keep a hold on reality. My tongue was stuck to my palate. I forced it to move.

‘You said that I was outside.’

‘In a manner of speaking, yet we are all caught in the bat-and-trap of stroke and dot.’

‘Are you...’ my voice trembled as I said this, ‘are you the White Friar?’

He laughed. Now that he had on no scarf, I could see that he had an inordinately large skull and that his hair was tousled as though he had lived for years in the wind.

‘I am a traveller: one moment smuggler, the next, merchant or lover or dancing spirit. Why not a monk of the Most Saelig Order of Saint Benedict?’

The woman had become smaller again and now, facing her, was the figure of a man, also naked. They were swaying together, or dancing, I  
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could not decide which.

‘Is something distracting you from our conversation, good curate?’

‘I don’t know,’ I began, and then an impotent anger welled up inside my chest. ‘I think that you are mad; either that, or a prankster.’

He shrugged. ‘Perhaps I am both. Do you see the casket at your feet?’

I looked down and sure enough, there at my feet was a silver casket which I hadn’t noticed before. He handed me a key.

‘Open it!’ he commanded.

I glanced quickly towards the bell, but the image had faded and the surface had returned to hard, cold metal.

I followed his instructions.

Beneath a velvet flap was a roll of something that looked like an old piece of wood. Carefully, I drew it out. It was a scroll of some sort, tied with a ribbon in like manner to a deed or other such legal document.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

He said nothing. I could barely make out his eyes. I undid the scroll. The sheaves fell from my hands and scattered on the floor. There must have been enough to fill a book. I scrambled around, trying to collect them up as they blew across the belfry. He laughed again.

‘These, dear curate, these pieces of skin after which on hands and knees you scramble, are the last remaining works of Master Aelfric, great architect of Wywurth, he who sang churches in the shape of love.’

I was breathing so heavily as I gathered up the sheaves, that I had no idea what he was saying.

‘Do you understand?’

‘I... I’m sorry. I’m not a young man. Coming up here... all this.’

He rushed forwards again and though this time he did not grab my collar, his face was so close to mine that I could almost feel the stubble on his jowl.

‘Stretch yourself. For once in your miserable life, leap off the belfry and fly!’

I stepped back, alarmed. I tried to steady my voice.

‘Why have you come here, this night?’

‘Why have you?’

‘I was dragged out of bed!’

‘Like stone was I dragged from vellum, through love, death, music.’

‘There is no music here.’

‘Listen...’

He brought his arm around in the shape of an arc, as though in that one sweep, he were gathering all of the country; the moot lands of thane and ceorl, the swans’ roads, the bone-houses, the spheres of spinning poste-mills, the trace of a dancer’s steps on stone, the dark hiding-places of priest and smuggler, the flow of generations across land and water into the forgetfulness of the House of Life that is the final honouring of the dead. And in that arc, as though from a great distance I found that I could hear the trip and stamp fantasie of naked soles upon the bare stone flags of the long gallery, the ash and lime songs of scops and the scratch and tear of skin against pig-iron bell ringing dully on winter’s morn of the Dark Strangers, and I was cleaving rock on a hillside in a strange and distant land and the guns of hell were screaming all around me. And a voice boomed in my ears and shook the bones of my skull till I feared it surely would split apart.

‘And then turn to the east and bow humbly nine times, and say then these words: ‘Eastwards I stand, for favours I pray.’ Then turn three times with the course of the sun, then stretch yourself along the ground and say a dark bede.’

And in the midst of all of this, I did fall into a swoon and when I awoke the man was gone and I was lying, half-frozen, on the belfry floor. My mouth was filled with the pungency of ripened corn, and the cool breeze carried with it the taste of stale pig-fat, mixed with salt blown off the tops of new-risen waves. My thumb and the first two fingers of my right hand were covered in dried black ink of type most pungent and the small joints

ached as though I had been writing all night. I massaged my fingers back to life, blowing onto them in a vain attempt to warm the flesh. As I prepared to make my exit from the tower, I walked past the bell. It was then I noticed that inscribed upon its dark, iron surface, was the image of two elongated, figures. I moved closer and brushed away an accumulation of dust and dirt which had accrued in the lines and hollows. As curate, I had ascended the tower of St Cuthman in times numbering the hundreds, but never before had I set eyes upon any such image. Yet this imprint seemed to have been burned into the substance of the bell for many long centuries, so pronounced was it, and yet so faded. The style belonged to the period of Good King Alfred, when our ancestors are said to have carved the ungodly horses, men and demons up on the white hills of the South Downs. On the bell were etched a man and a woman, their forms set in relation to each other in such a way as to connote that they were dancing. The face of the woman I recognised from the night before, though still I did not know who she was; however, as I ran my index finger along the lines, it seemed as though I had known the man's visage for longer than I had known my own.

I shot down the steps of the tower and hastily locked the church and made my way back home, carefully avoiding the village. That Sabbath day, no bells were heard in Wywurth and no service was held. When next I ventured into St Cuthman's, it was as though nothing had happened. One evening, a few days later, I found a large cask of red wine and a box of cigars at my doorstep.

The first of the night birds began to sound out. The vicar put down the book. The two men looked at each other. There were no words between them. Both were back fifty years, floating on the face of the river which flowed over stone and reed. A silly summer's day in deepest Sussex. The Pevensy March.

At first, the three of them sang as one, Edward's voice being almost a Russian bass, while John's was towards the baritone and Caroline's a mid-alto. Though none were trained singers, they were all young and filled with health and happiness and their lungs pushed the air through their throats so that to each one of them the noise of the river was almost drowned out and all they could hear was their song.

*As I walk'd out one day, one day, I met an a-ged man by the way;  
His head was bald, his beard was grey\_His cloth-ing made of the  
cold earthen clay, His cloth-ing made of the cold earth-en clay.  
I said: Old man\_what man are you? What country do you be-long  
un-to? My name is Death; hast though heard of me\_All kings and  
prin-ces bow down un-to me, And you, fair maid, must come a- long  
with me.*

*I'll give you gold,\_I'll give you pearl, I'll give you cost-ly rich robes  
to wear, If you will spare me a\_ lit-tle while, And give me time my  
life to a-mend, And give me time my life\_to a-mend.*

*I'll have no gold, I'll have no pearl, I want no cost-ly rich robes to  
wear. I can-not spare you a\_ lit-tle while, \_Nor give you time\_ your  
life to a-mend, Nor give you time your life to a-mend.*

*In six months' time this fair maid died. Let this be put on my tomb-  
stone, she cried: Here lies a poor,\_dis-tress-ed maid;\_Just in her*

*bloom she was snath-ed a-way, Her cloth-ing made of the cold earth-en clay.*

And so the boats sailed on through the forest, along that stretch of river where the current slackens as the land beyond its banks broadens out and grows flatter. The trees – yew, elder, willow, oak – were in full, dark leaf and the branches overhung the oxbows which had been formed many thousands of years earlier when the great glaciers far leagues to the north had melted and the river been created, much as in the tale of Noah. And the land and the waters, both, had moved again and had changed since Saxon times and by the long reign of Queen Victoria, the sea, once some seven leagues distant, had swept up to the very foot of the hill on which St Cuthman’s Church had been built.

The boats began slowly to drift apart.

Edward ended his song with great gusto (it is possible to sing thus about death only when one is in the first flush of life) and then stared up at the sun through the leaves. The creaking sounds of the boat’s hull filled his ears, and he fell asleep. He dreamed of a great tower, around which were being played games of Nine Men’s Morris and Bat-and-Trap. He dreamed of Gooding women, their breath turned to smoke in the frozen air, carrying meat-and-raisin pies and sugar-loaves shaped like conical tombs to one another’s houses through the snow on the Day of the Feast of Saint Thomas Didymus; of Wealden houses where, at dead of night, lovers crept downstairs and through the servants’ gate and ran towards the owl eyes of the dark woods; of the bottomless lake where the ghost of the green nicor screams in coiled poisoned agony; of eleven thousand virgins chanting and skipping to draw the seeds up through the corpse’d earth; of shoals of gleaming, silver mackerel caught in the long, corked nets of fishermen in boats bedecked with ribbons and flowers; of magical Yule babies roasting in elder log fires; of shepherd’s crowns, grinning on the mantelpiece; of a naked man climbing up a cliff-face to collect honey out of a cranny; of the horns of spiced ale blown over swarms of bees as they hived on living branches; of ancient, wrinkled demons who danced around the Ring of Chanctonbury and who offered ten-foot long suet puddings and fire wine to the eleven thousand virgins...

When he awoke, his boat was stationary. He levered himself up and peered over the edge. The other boats were nowhere to be seen.

Panic rose like a spring flood into his throat.

They must have gone on without him.

Edward had ended up at the end of a stagnant oxbow. Gnats and dragonflies danced courtship rituals across the transparent skin of the grey water. Deep down, near the shifting layers of river-mud, the water had remained unchanged, unmoving, for centuries. The prow of his boat was wedged in the mud of a bank, too steep to climb. It would take all his effort to push the boat back into the water and row all the way back to the river proper. But he was unable to make out the main body of the river. He had heard that Mychelham Water had never fully been cartographed. Even the horn-rimmed men from the Ordnance Survey, with their dividers and compasses and stiffened suits had had difficulty; the mud was so shifting, the land around it so oily and fickle.

As he tried to trace the chain of events, the whole day reduced to a blur.

They had gone off together, the three of them, in their rickety rowingboats. At some point along the river, he had fallen asleep. He tried to catch his dreams, but they were elusive as river reeds. What if the others had drowned? He shuddered. But the river was slow-moving and both Caroline and John were excellent swimmers. The three of them had often leapt into the forest lake and for a delicious, skin moment, had died in its dark, freezing waters. But rivers were different; like snakes, they changed form constantly while yet remaining the same, they sought out points of weakness, then wound their reeds around ankles and necks. Edward felt so drained, he wondered if he had the strength to row the boat homewards. Then he had the vision of a dream, which seemed real: John and Caroline, naked and joined on the felled trunk of an ancient yew. What once had been the upper end, the growing end, of a tree was now submerged beneath the waters of the Mychelham, while the thousand year-old trunk reared into the sun-scaped air, malevolent, green shoots sprouting from its centre. And as their bodies shifted, one upon the other, their skins rubbed into the bark and merged with the skins of other, earlier lovers. Each whorl of wood bore the rune-marks of such conjunctions, all the way back to when the abbot had leaned against its trunk and dreamed of three long-boats dancing in the spume of the river-mouth and of a Roman fig-tree sagging with fruit. The faces of all the lovers, past and future, were turned as one toward the slowly-flowing water and their breath was the air which danced across its surface and formed bubbles that pulled carp and trout and roach up from their dark holes and into the sunlight. Then the vision evanesced and Edward was left, cold and sweating and alone in the bottom of a rotting boat. He felt a fist of rage in his belly. Possessed by his own dark spirit, he leaned over the rim of the boat and spat into the river and watched the spittle swirl and merge with the cold water. He picked up the oars and began to row, not knowing whether he was going up or down stream, towards home or away from it. He needed to immerse his body in an act of total physicality. He did not notice the pair of rowingboats, half-sunk like crocodiles in swamp, nor the massive tree-trunk toppled into the river, nor the shape, like an archetypal majuscule, of two lovers pressed upon its surface, nor the runes which their corpses carved into the wood.

It was at the moment when he knew his body could row no more that Edward found the river again. He let the oars fall into their metal sockets, slumped back and watched the wispy clouds sail through the blue. Gradually, the pain in his chest subsided. And it was then that he had heard the song.

The vicar shifted in his seat. His body felt as though it was turning slowly to wood. Rotherfield spoke first.

‘You saw us that day, you saw us and you told.’

‘I saw nothing. Yes, it’s true. I did love her. Even though I always knew she would never want me. I would never dance in the notes of her song.’

‘So, was it repentance, or revenge?’

Edward shrugged. ‘The worst betrayals, the ones for which we suffer all our lives, are those of which we are least aware. Ultimately, we betray

only ourselves.'

'I went to war, became no more than a worm in the swarming mud. I volunteered for death. That's why I stood up and watched the man in the greatcoat. Even now, I don't know whether he really existed.'

'That's not what you said. You didn't mention standing up yourself. And you said that, later, he handed you his card. What about the prisoncamp, the ruined church, Saint Cecilia? The brass head, the wooden house in Constantinople? The chants, the manuscripts? Caroline.'

Rotherfield pointedly ignored him. 'I thought, if he's able to stand erect, then so shall I. And on the prison hill, when I turned the card over, it was blank.'

'We heard you were dead.'

'I was never more than a ripple on the surface of time. I was already as nothing.'

'Not to Caroline.'

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'Life goes on: she married the law-giver.'

'And plays the church organ.'

'Yes, I've heard her play.'

'She plays with such sadness. Her fingers dance runes along the wood, the bone.'

'She no longer sings?'

'Never.' Edward took a deep breath. 'John, we are different people now, different than we were then.'

Rotherfield shook his head. 'I think not. We dance the same dances and sing the same words, over and over again.'

'There was something wrong with each section of this book,' Edward cut in. 'Were I to submit the text to an Anglo-Saxon scholar, a Tudor specialist and an expert in early nineteenth century south coast smuggling, I'm certain they would expose it as a fake – and, I might add, written by a man who lived a fake life.' He paused, then raised himself up and half-arched the upper part of his body over the edge of the table. 'You wrote this, didn't you? You are its author.'

A crescent moon had just emerged from behind the clouds. Rotherfield gazed up at it. 'My body was never found.'

'Caroline received a box of Latakia cigarettes and a musical score for church organ. A score which she has never played. Cigarettes she has never smoked.' The vicar picked up the book and brandished it at the woodcutter. 'And decades later, from the sale of Birkin Mansion, the last inheritance of Caroline's long-dead father, the last remaining stone in the doorway of the old Saxon earls of the South, there came this book. She couldn't bring herself to destroy it. Perhaps she had hoped that some stranger would buy it and take it far away.'

'I think it's time I left. Dawn will be upon us soon.' Rotherfield rose.

'But before I go, I want to ask you one question.'

The vicar's face sagged, as though all of his years had descended upon him at once. He remained silent.

'Did you really see us?'

Edward shook his head. 'I heard your song, smelled your love on the river-wind. And in the dark reeds of the oxbow, I foresaw your death.'

Rotherfield nodded. 'Then you, too are in the text. In the last chapter. Read it, when I am gone. Then give it to Caroline. Ask her to play the score "The Palace is Beautiful". It is a perfect unity of the mundane, the

human, the instrumental. No living soul has heard it for three thousand years.' And gathering up his axe, he limped away. And as Rotherfield passed through the outer gardens and orchards and approached Mychelham Water, his form took on the aspect of a shadow, a moving pyramid that merged with the uncertain light and became imperceptible. In the distance, smoke from fires lit by drovers rose into the opalescent dawn. There was a hint of charcoal in the fresh morning air. Edward bent and lifted the small pile of logs, walked stiffly into the house and locked the door behind him. Going straight to his study, he placed the wood in the grate, took a taper from the mantelpiece and lit it with his cigar-butt.

When the hearth-stone was burning to the touch, he grasped the book and flung into the rear of the fire.

'The Dream of the Rood' (anon), p. 241, is translated from the Old English by L. Iddings; 'The Wanderer' (anon), p. 244, is E. Hickey's translation. Both appear in *Translations from Old English Poetry*, Ginn and Company, Boston, 1902. 'Death and the Lady', p. 281, is from Cecil Sharp's *English Folk Songs*.