

NOR BID THE STARS FAREWELL

A collection of poems and short stories

by

Patricia Masson



Patricia Masson
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YOU'RE NEVER AN ECO

O Beast my brother, sh
Dweller with me between t
Who sought with joy i
Strength that to life from k
Now in the circle of life it b
That the life in you shall be

Flesh of my brother
I will live true to m

The life you give
To the help of all th

O Plants my cousins, w
And power of life from ear
Your leaves, outspread
Received their gifts that m
Now in the circle of life it b
That the life in you shall be

O my green cousins
I will live true to m

The life you give
To the help of all th

O Life of earth, of sea
Dancing in every life that
May my strength of limb,
Be one with the life of all i
Since in the circle of life it
That the holy gift of life yo

Love universal,
I will live true to m

The life you give
To the help of all th

AN ECOLOGICAL GRACE

O Beast my brother, sharer of earth,
Dweller with me between the bounds of death and birth,
Who sought with joy in herb and grass
Strength that to life from kindred life must pass,
Now in the circle of life it has come to be
That the life in you shall be the life in me.

Flesh of my brother, I will keep faith;
I will live true to my share in your growth and
in your death.

The life you give you do not lose;
To the help of all that lives this life I'll use.

O Plants my cousins, who lived and grew
And power of life from earth and light and water drew,
Your leaves, outspread to sun and air,
Received their gifts that made you strong and fair.
Now in the circle of life it has come to be
That the life in you shall be the life in me.

O my green cousins, I will keep faith;
I will live true to my share in your growth and
in your death.

The life you give you do not lose;
To the help of all that lives this life I'll use.

O Life of earth, of sea and sun,
Dancing in every life that lives, countless and one,
May my strength of limb, my joy of soul,
Be one with the life of all in the perfect whole,
Since in the circle of life it has come to be
That the holy gift of life you trust to me.

Love universal, I will keep faith;
I will live true to my share in your gifts of
growth and death.

The life you give you shall not lose;
To the help of all that lives this life I'll use.

PROSPECTUS

We are a modern, enterprising Company
dealing in every fashionable lunacy.
The pigs we sell are shrink-wrapped in a poke
no thicker than is usual (just a joke!),
and it can confidently be asserted
Our PR men will soon have you converted,
and any lingering selfhood whittled down
to values customary in our town.
Why be yourself when you can be another?
Love only your imaginary brother!
How can you know, until you have succumbed,
that you won't like the depths that we have plumbed?
And if it's ugly, what we bid you try,
how will you see it, with a blinded eye?

YE'RE NEVER THE MAN YOUR FATHER WAS

(Comic, stage Irish)

Och, my Mother's been a widow near as long as I recall
With half a dozen kids, and me the eldest of 'em all.
I had to be the man o' the house; my part I tried to play
But the thing that made it hardest was to hear the neighbours say:

Chorus:

Och, ye're never the man your father was -
A pity - but it's true.
Everybody sings the praises of the things that he could do.
Now it's you must try to take his place, and you so young and small,
But ye're never the man your father was, at all, at all, at all.

As soon as I was old enough, I went and got a job
With the firm my father worked for, carrying a hod.
I felt I was a man at last, and proud as I could be,
At least that's how it was until the foreman said to me:

Chorus:

Och, ye're never the man your father was -
A pity - but it's true.
When your father used to work here, he'd do twice as much as you.
The bricks he'd carry in one trip would build a ten-foot wall,
But ye're never the man your father was, at all, at all, at all.

As I went home, upon the way I passed O'Reilley's bar
So I thought I'd go inside and drown my sorrows in a jar.
But when I tried to leave the place, somebody moved the door
And I heard O'Reilly saying as I slumped upon the floor:

Chorus:

Och, ye're never the man your father was -
A pity, but it's true.
When your father used to drink here he'd have twice as much as you
Then walk right home along the street, and never sway or fall,
But ye're never the man your father was, at all, at all, at all.

Last summer I got married to the widow Maeve Malone.
She's well-off and she's well-preserved and well, she's now me own.
"And how was it for you?" I asked, when first we went to bed.
Imagine my embarrassment, when this was what she said:

Chorus:

Och, ye're never the man your father was -
A pity, but it's true.
Sure, I often had your father, and he was twice as good as you
When I heard whose son you were, I knew for you I'd fall -
But ye're never the man your father was, at all, at all, at all..

THE STALLION

And did you think your arms could tie that stallion down?
Well lady, you must be the biggest fool in town.
If you'd asked me I'd have told
You that the man you tried to hold
Has always been the kind that spreads his lovin' around.

And did you think your kissin' would make that tiger tame,
The sort of gentle kitten that'd purr and play your game?
He always liked an open range
And that kind of man don't change,
So if you find him missin' you've only got yourself to blame.

(B-music)

You had a dream of faithful love, you dreamed that it came true,
But the man you thought the angels brought was only foolin' you.
You thought he'd settle down, but can't you see he never will
While he thinks he's seen some grass that's greener on some other hill.

Why don't you cut your losses and don't see him at all,
And find another lover who'll come to you when you call?
'Cause it's a waste of time to try
To tame that kind of guy
Who thinks that if he's tied down then he can't walk tall.

Or if you yearn for the lovin' things he did to you
And feel you need him back again to do them all anew,
Then don't you frown or scold or whine,
Tell him the way he is, is fine
A man who makes you happy is better than a man who's true.

MAKING WAVES

An Experiment in Alliteration

Stillness.

Plop!

Water wakes,

moveless before that moment.

Myself am come; in the calm surface

ripples expand wide from the spot of my rising,

announcing to the remotest parts of the pool the momentous news.

From the core of their restless hurry I watch my heralds race, because
the thought my mind loves to ponder, the pleasure that delights most, the thing
that puts a smile on my face is being - I - a big fish in a small pond.

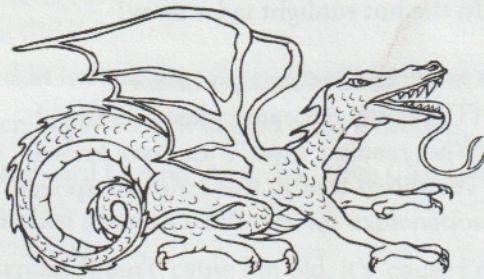
Rings forming; rising, falling, rocking, failing, resting finally; ripples fade.

Stillness.

DRAGON-FIGHTER

Cursed is the country! Kingless, nigh hopeless
of any chance of change in their cheerless doom
of long oppression and pain, the people have suffered
long and with loathing, for they lie in thrall
to a dread demon. Dragon and warrior
both he is, and baneful. A blaze in the darkness
and in sudden slaughter sleep is ended,
farmland and forest-land with a flame-crop replanted
that rises, ripens, reddens, and withers at last
to a drear desert. At the dawn's breaking
he shifts his shape, shows now the semblance
of mocked humanity. Men he has recruited
by force or fee follow and serve him
and call him king. With the coming of dark
and the fading of light, as the falling sun's
undermost edge meets the earth's far brink,
the linden shield lifted to protect him
and bloody broadsword brandished in anger
to deal death-blows drop in a moment
clattering from his clutches - claws cannot grip them -
then his byrnie bursts as his body grows vast,
and like scabs on the skin scales are seen forming.
First of all his flesh, the fierce-eyed countenance
and haughty head are wholly changed,
and while manlike on mould the monster stands
a fell fountain of fire forced from his grinning jaws,
weapon of his worm shape, worse to contend with
than sword-blade or spear-point, seeks out its victim
whose shape shrivels down into sheer cinders
to be wafted away on the winds of night.

A stranger came striding by. Destruction and harm
on all sides he saw, and the sufferings of the people
grieved him greatly. Grim in warfare
though young in years, and used to battle,
he would fight to set free folk so tormented.
Others had ere this uttered bold speeches
to the merciless monster; maiming and slaughter
rewarded each one of them. They weakened in the fight
while the dragon-man endured. Doughtier is this hero,
strong enough and steadfast to withstand all harm
and by courage and cunning conquer the enemy.
On a ruined river-bank, to raven-blackness
charred by dragon-breath, he challenged the tyrant,
facing him fearlessly, defying his menace;
waits now in that wasteland his word to make good:
either to fall in the field or free them from their thralldom.



THE MESSAGE

I seal my message in the bottle,
Written in the only tongue I know,
Cast it adrift and wonder: "What'll
They make of it where it may go?"

Will it be found by one who speaks
The language of another land
And sees no meaning in the streaks
That stain the paper in his hand?

Will it sink down where crabs and huss
Seek for the carrion they need,
And neither know nor care for us
Who need to write what they can't read?

Will it, commuting with the tide,
Float back and to by night and day
Until the message shrined inside
In the hot sunlight fades away?

Or will it meet the eyes of one
(The bottle once uncorked or broken)
Who, reading, says: "I too have known
The things that in this script are spoken."?

THE BALD MAN'S EXCUSE

(or: It ain't 'cause I'm old, it's 'cause I'm sexy)

Charlie didn't have a care till the day he lost his hair.
Since then he's been as miserable as sin,
Till just the other day, all his troubles blew away.
When we asked him why, he answered with a grin,
Oh, it ain't 'cause I'm old, it's 'cause I'm sexy.
And I hope nobody thinks I'd tell a lie,
But if there's any lady who suspects me,
She's welcome to give me a try.

There's an article I've seen this week in a magazine
Says that if a head's as bare as some old bone
That needn't mean to say that a man has had his day,
It could be he's got too much male hormone:
So, it ain't 'cause I'm old, it's 'cause I'm sexy
That all those glossy waves have waved goodbye,
And ladies, it surely won't vex me
If you call round and give me a try!

But that isn't all the tale; piece of cake came through the mail.
When I opened it, it caused a big sensation,
For the card I found inside was from Charlie and his bride -
Looks like somebody believed his explanation!
He wrote: It ain't 'cause I'm old, it's 'cause I'm sexy.
Now I've found someone as sweet as apple-pie,
And I still know how to bill and coo and neck, see?
So she's willing to give me a try.

Hymn to Earendil

All hail Eärendil: for Elf-folk and Mortal-kind
sent once to intercede, seeking for grace,
help against hell-powers, from the holy Valar,
Lords of the West; launched from Middle-earth
into darkness and dread, driven by storm,
till you attained to Tirion, told then your errand
from the people oppressed. With their prayers you were
freighted,
their tears and their need, in that time of evil.
Now, a messenger once more, to Men and Elven-kin
you heralded a new hope. On high in the star-region
the vision of Vingilot, by Varda made glorious,
outshone all the stars, the ship of Gil-Estel.
And still even yet, through the years innumerable,
your brow hallowed with the bright rays
of the Jewel of Fëanor, as on journeys beyond the world
you come and go, then, carrying the tidings
that the Children in their need are never forsaken
by the Powers of Good, appears in the twilight
the Silmaril, the signal, the symbol of rescue
to Men in Middle-earth whenever Morgoth's legacy
of strife and deceit grows strong again in Arda;
that when evil seems over-strong in our age of the world,
our hope may rekindle, beholding in your beacon,
still lovely and living, the light of the Two Trees.
All hail Eärendil, most excellent of stars:

The Yule-Tree

In a grove of the woods, away from the homesteads,
was that sacred spot the Spirit of all life
deigned to dwell in. None could doubt who saw it
how holy and haunted that hallow of the god,
the eldest of oaks; of all in the forest
greatest in girth; the ground he overshadowed
broader than a mead-hall, his mighty branches
the timbers of its roof; towering he uplifted
his head in the heavens, hearing and uttering
in whispers to the winds words that men know not,
runes of the High Ones; roots in the earth
fixed and fastened, firmly implanted
unmoving in the mould, where mortals honoured him.
So seemed he in summer, the season of his power,
awesome and noble. Now, the oppressors,
Death and the Dark, are driving him hard,
sapping his strength. Stripped by the Frost-demons
of his green garment, his ground-shadowing limbs
bare as old bones, when the blizzards mock him
how wildly he mourns, bewailing his distress!
For the Lord of Life, beleaguered by Winter,
ails now in anguish. From of old it has been spoken
how at Yule of the year he must yield him to Death
that quells even gods, and quicken the springtime
never more in the middle-earth, save if men in devotion
restore again life to the Lord who bestowed it,
to the Giver of all Good bringing again his own.
So one man now walks, with worshippers about him,
to the place appointed, set apart and hallowed
for the keeping of that custom, as the counsel of dread
that their forefathers followed they fulfil in their turn.
He mourns not his fate, for a man must die,
and better in this battle where the bliss of the summertime,
prosperity for his people, is the prize to be won,
than stretched on the straw, stricken with age -
a dastard's death that is deemed for a warrior.
The sacrifice is near. Your sufferings endure
but a little while, Lord, and your loss shall be made good:

THE LAST VALKYRIE

. . . and here are witches and
Valkyries . . .

Wulfstan, Address to the
English, AD 1014

. . . the gods . . . flow in and
out of one another like eddies on a
river . . .

C. S. Lewis, Till We Have
Faces.

Woman, by her weird lured,
waiting stands, for the land's
king, so called, and his long
craft, wading deep-laden.
With fighting-men freighted,
forth they sailed to northward;
came to coast at Hastings,
keen and armed to do harm.

Maid she has lived, has loved
the lore only of war;
waelcyrige, weaves with skill
war-men's doom on the loom.
When she heard her liege-lord
lay in need of such deeds,
her mind was, might to lend,
making spells for his sake.

Runes she wrote, but in vain,
wrought not all as she thought
but stopped, her spell stilling,
standing idle-handed.
A sweven, by the god given,
grants her to view truly

her king's fated future,
nor fight against Weird's might.

Harold felled she beholds:
hoar appletree - nay more -
in a shrine her folk shun
is shown a tale well-known:
a god given to be dead
greet the king at meeting,
welcomes him to Waelheall,
worthily slain on earth.

Knowing the aid needed
now, what fate would allow,
manlike rode the maiden
in mail, her brand handling.
That hard ancient order's
arts now are departed;
the last lies at Hastings
with her lord, slain with sword.

Notes to the Last Valkyrie

- Metre: Derived from (an inadequate knowledge of) Drottkvaett, the Old Norse court metre.
- line 11: waelcyrrie = valkyrie
- line 12: Cf. Njal's Saga ch. 157, in which before the battle of Clontarf valkyries are seen weaving on a loom with men's heads for weights and human intestines for weft and warp.
- line 21: sweven = vision
- line 26: hoar appletree - Worcester Chronicle entry for 1066
- lines 27 - 32: Cf. (1) the legend of the image of the crucified Christ bowing its head to Harold as he prayed before the Battle of Hastings.
(2) Heimskringla, Ynglinga Saga ch. 10:
The Swedes believed that (Odin) often showed himself to them before any great battle. To some he gave victory; others he invited to himself; and they reckoned both of these to be fortunate."
- line 31: Waelheall = Valhalla

NIGHTMARE

This started as an ordinary morning, just like so many others. The alarm clock woke me at the usual time, I turned to look at Kevin, nudged him awake and gave him the usual 'good morning' kiss. I got up, dressed, made the tea and took it into the bedroom, and nudged Kevin awake again as I usually have to. I stayed in the bedroom to drink my own tea, as I do whenever there is time, partly to wake Kevin up if he looks like falling asleep again, but chiefly because this makes it into another of the things we do together. We've been married two years now and I still get a thrill out of doing things, even simple things like that, together with Kevin.

I finished my tea and went to get breakfast ready, and it was still an ordinary day.

Perhaps it began to be different when, in the middle of breakfast, I suddenly got up and walked round the table to kiss Kevin on the forehead. (I couldn't kiss any lower without risking a spoonful of muesli in my face.) Not that this was so strange either, after all I do love him so much, but it was unusual enough for Kevin to look up with that smile of his that I never could resist, and say, "You're very affectionate all of a sudden. What's this in aid of?"

"Just because I love you." I said.

He turned his attention back to his plate and I spoke again, I think just to make him look at me so that I could go on seeing his face, and began telling him about my nightmare.

"I had a horrible dream last night. I dreamt . . . Well, to begin with all I knew was just this terrible feeling of sadness. I was here, in this house. Everything seemed quite normal, I couldn't put my finger on any one thing that was wrong, and yet I felt as if somehow everything was wrong.

"Then I realised it was because you weren't here, and the reason you weren't here was because you were dead. There'd been some kind of accident, and you had been killed - and - oh, yes, I was scarred - my face - but that didn't matter because you would never see me again. I was in hospital - no, that can't be right because I was here. You know how things get muddled up in dreams. I suppose I'd been in hospital, but now I was here, living in this house on my own, and you were gone, and would never come back.

"I can't remember any more; it's fading already; but it was such a lovely relief to wake up and realise it was only a dream. It made me so happy, just seeing you there beside me, that I've been feeling happy ever since."

I bent down to kiss him again, and he was just putting his arms round me when I heard a noise. It sounded like the alarm clock in the bedroom, but I wondered why it seemed so near, and why it was ringing now, when we were both up and dressed.

And now I find myself back in bed, and the alarm is ringing on the bedside cabinet. I turn to Kevin, but he isn't there, and his pillow looks smooth and plump, almost as if it hadn't been slept on.

Oh no! I'm waking up! This is waking, and that, that other morning, was a

dream, and something is terribly wrong. I know there's something - something I mustn't - daren't think about.

I'm beginning to remember: the accident, and the hospital - no, that was in the nightmare, wasn't it? I'm still confused.

Now I'm remembering a party. Going there, Kevin driving tight-lipped, purposely not looking at me but I caught sight of his face, glancing sidelong at him then looking away quickly so as not to meet his eyes if he should be doing the same thing. Knowing how my own face looked, too, and feeling all the angrier for it. All that money spent on my dress, all that time and trouble on my make-up, all wasted because my expression was ruining the effect, hard and tense when I should have been charming and relaxed. And it's all Kevin's fault, being so pig-headed about (Whatever was it about? If it had been anything important surely I'd remember, but I can't.)

I remember arriving, though, putting on a smile, convincingly enough, I thought, and talking cheerfully to everyone except Kevin. Ignoring him, or trying to, but having to notice him from time to time all the same.

. . . Kevin shouldn't be drinking. Has he forgotten he'll have to drive home? Should I remind him? I'll bet that's why he's doing it, so that I'll be the first to speak. He knows, all right.

. . . What's the matter with Kevin now? Has he had too much to drink? No, he's putting it on, just to make me pay attention to him. Well, it isn't going to work. And he needn't think I'm going to drive home; he knows it's his turn.

. . . Good, he's getting into the driver's seat; he must be all right. And if he isn't, and he gets caught and loses his licence, it'll be his own fault, and he'll have to admit it. Suppose we have an accident and he smashes the car up - what if I was hurt, or killed even? Then he'd be sorry! . . .

Oh, this is nonsense! I could never behave like that, not to Kevin. It's impossible; I love him. Oh, I do love him so much!

Well then, that proves it was only a nightmare. Kevin must just have got up early, and then plumped up his pillow. He'll be downstairs now, and wanting his breakfast, so it's high time I was up and doing.

I put my hands to my face to rub the sleep from my eyes. I feel the scars.

Oh, God!

Oh Kevin! Kevin!

But he was here! I saw him I touched him, I kissed him! He spoke to me: Kevin's voice, Kevin's smile. It was all real. . . .

No, it was just a very vivid dream. Must have been the effect of those sleeping tablets I took. I'm awake now. My Kevin's gone, and he'll never come back.

In that case, there's no point in getting up, nothing to get up for. . . .

Perhaps if I take some more tablets and go back to sleep I'll have that dream again. . . .

Perhaps, if I take enough of them, I'll never have to wake up into the nightmare any more.

THE MONA LISA (or The Smile)

It was his masterpiece: the crowning achievement of his artistic life. Not the end of it; no, rather its true beginning, for today the unknown goal he had been seeking in all he did as painter, writer, scientist, had been granted to him; not understood, certainly, but set before his eyes, so that he had been able to embody it in paint.

Surely - he was not sure what he believed in - but some higher power must have favoured him this day, for how nearly he had missed this chance. Waking long after sunrise, mind and body disordered, his only wish had been to stay in bed until he recovered from last night's over-indulgences, when the chimes of noon reminded him not only of the time, but of the lady who would now be on her way to his studio for the last sitting of her portrait. Even at this eleventh hour he would have sent a message cancelling the appointment, but the memory of unpaid bills forced him to dress hurriedly, splash his face with cold water and prepare to spend the last few begrudged hours on a routine commission that should pay for another few months' food and lodging.

But as soon as he began work all this changed, for he had never before seen the sitter's face as he saw it now. Gone was the combination of carefully posed dignity and underlying boredom. The composure was still there, but beneath it now, like a strange landscape half seen through a thin net curtain, a secret smile seeming to express all the tragicomedy of human existence, at once mocked, pitied and allured him. Aches and pains forgotten, he worked frantically to transform the painting, in this one remaining sitting, into an expression of his vision, and all the while her gaze, the curve of her unmoving lips, said to him "I perceive, I know, something of which you, for all your cleverness, are totally unaware, but which, in time, you will discover."

At last it was finished; he laid down his palette and brushes, turned the easel, and the lady saw her own face as he had seen it. She rose, came over to look more closely, and spoke for the first time, thanking him in formal words that came

incongruously from a mouth that still wore that haunting smile.

"No," he answered. "Rather it is I who should thank you. This is my finest work, and but for you, but for something which I found in your face, it could never have been achieved." Having once begun to speak, he dared to make a confidante of this wondrous being, and continued, "To think that I was within an ace of cancelling this sitting! I was so-so unwell this morning that it was not until you were almost at my door that I was able to drag myself out of bed and fling on my clothes in time to greet you."

The mystery of her expression intensified as she nodded gravely. "I know," she said.

He gasped. Could it be that her expression betokened some mystical enlightenment that enabled her to see through walls, or read men's very minds?

"How - How could you know that?" he stammered, and her closed lips opened like petals as the half-smile at last blossomed into a giggle.

"You forgot to put your trousers on."



A Lay of St. Boniface

Winter at its midmost. In his weakness the Sun,
a doddering dotard, had dared to creep forth,
rising late from his bed, to limp a short space
up the hill of heaven. Soon, his heart quailing
he must tire, totter down, turn again to his rest.
A passion of pity overpowered me at the sight
of the god so disgraced, whose glory in summer
had lightened the land, lifted up our spirits
with brightness and beauty, the bounty accorded him
10 by the Lord of Life, light-bestower,
bringer of blessing. In that blissful season
all green things that grow, grass in the meadows,
herbs of the wilderness, worts of the gardens,
all that flowers and bears fruit in farm-field or woodland
had leapt into life; by that Lord's power
all beasts had bred, the bull at his urging
got calves on the kine, cocks trod their hens;
men mastered maidens. But for me sufficed not
such cheerful worship, chosen and dedicated
20 for a service more sacred when the season should change.

The moment was come now. The might that had cherished us,
the Lord, the Life-giver, beleaguered by darkness,
ailed now in anguish. From of old it was spoken,
how at Yule of the year he must yield him to Death,
that quells even gods, and quicken the springtime
no more in the middle-earth, save if men in devotion
restore again life to the Lord who bestowed it,
to the giver of all good yielding again his own:
for the life of the herds a horse or a bull,
30 of our bread and our beer for the barley and the wheat
our fields had brought forth, and the folk moreover
must seek among their sons the sacrifice proper
for the life of man. On me the choice fell.
This was wherefore I walked in worship and glory
to the place appointed, set apart and hallowed
for the keeping of that custom, as the counsel of dread
that our forefathers followed we fulfilled in our turn.

Behind me I heard a high-pitched outcry,
a woman in her weakness wailing a lament.
40 Mourn me not, Mother for each man must die,
and better in this battle where the bliss of the summer,
prosperity for our people, is the prize to be won,
than stretched in the straw, stricken with age -
a dastard death that is deemed by warriors.

High above men's houses, on the holy mountain
was that sacred spot the Spirit of all life
deigned to indwell. None could doubt who saw it
that holiness haunted that hallow of the god,
eldest of oak-trees, of all in our land
50 the greatest in girth, the ground he overshadowed
broader than a mead-hall, branches far-spreading
the timbers of its roof. Towering he uplifted
his head in the heavens, hearing and conversing
in whispers with the winds in words that men know not,
runes of the High Ones; roots in the deep earth
fixed and fastened firmly and securely,
moveless in the mould, where mortals honoured him;
and betwixt these twain a twilight country,
a life-haunted labyrinth of leaves and branches
60 bewildering the sight. So seemed he in his prime,
noble and awful. Now, the oppressors,
Death and the Dark, are driving him hard,
strongly as he strives. Stripped by the Frost-giants
of his green garment, his ground-shadowing limbs
bare as old bones, when the blizzards mock him
how wildly he wails, weeping the dire loss
of his vigour and fruitfulness: Not in vain have you called
on your servants for succour: Your suffering endure
but a little while, Lord, and your lack shall be made good:

70 As we approached the place, plainly we could see him
high on his hill-top, the holy one standing
gaunt as a gallows before the gloomy heavens
as we climbed ever closer. Then a clamour broke out,
as terror over took us: The Tree's self was moving,
coming towards us. With a cry like a man groaning,

it faltered; it fell: Into four parts shattered
it lay, what was left of it, low on the earth's face,
riven and in ruin, irrevocably felled,
and the heavens above the hill were horribly empty
80 where its form had filled them, save for the figure of a man
who stood by the stump, still and unafraid,
and held in his hand the haft of the felling-axe
that had struck that stroke: the stranger who called himself
Winfrith the Well-doer, who wilfully had departed
into exile from his England, for some oath that impelled him
to dwell in danger in a distant land.
So he came to our country, where he called upon our people
to attend to strange tales, teaching a new doctrine
to the few who would follow him. Folk for the most part
90 heard him not nor heeded, holding that his babble
was witless and wandering. When he warned that at this season
he would dare such a deed, no danger we had feared,
but reckoned that he raved, bereft of his senses.

Now we stood stone-still, and in stark horror
gazed into that gap where our god had been steadfast
since middle-earth's making, till a man had struck him
one blow with a blade, and broken the power
we had feared and fostered. At first for a little while
horror kept us hushed. Then I heard a voice arise,
100 a mourning moan, as of one mad with terror:
"Winter has won, and the world is doomed:
We can send no sacrifice. Summer cannot return.
No drawing-out of days, but the drear twilight
shall linger and lengthen, the light and the comfort
fade still and falter until they fail at the end.
Never growth, never green, never grain for the reapers,
but dearth and darkness, and death inescapable
with no god to be our guardian." Grim answered another:
"And all the work of this wizard, this wanton destroyer:
110 Shall the foeman go free, fleering and gloating over
his harvest of harm? Have at him! Kill him!
Though all vows are now vain, let one victim, and the last,
blacken with poured blood the bole that he has severed

and be the first to feel the fate he has called down!"
Not a man of us moved. Mighty as was our anger,
no weapon was drawn, for the world as we had known it
was shattered in that shock, all sureness was gone,
nor were men of one mind. Many there were who reasoned,
the Life-Lord being lost to us, his laws were unmade
120 that would call on us to kill the causer of our ruin.
Let him wend where he would. What worth to us now,
when the deed was done, were the death of the destroyer?

Boldly Boniface braved our anger,
flinched not nor fled, but faced our hatred
with will unwavering. Watching from his standpoint
he beheld and heard us hanging back irresolute
without strength to strike him. Striding towards us
he clearly declared his claim to victory.
"Look now where it lies, brought low and abolished,
130 the wood that you worshipped! To ward you from harm
you prayed and implored it, paying it in men's blood
the fee of your fears, that had not force in itself
to stave off from its stem the steel of an axe-blade.
False and unfounded was the fear that tempted you
to such devilish deeds, death of the innocent,
neighbours and kinsmen needlessly slaughtered.
Be free now from fear! Have faith and believe
that life's true Lord is a loving father,
granting ungrudgingly the gifts of the harvest
140 from his unfailing fullness. He enforces no price,
having need of nothing, who is nature's source,
and holds in his hands both the heavens and the earth."

Some welcomed his words: women for the most part,
mothers and maidens whose menfolk in past years
had been given to the god. Their grief-wounded hearts,
sickened of sacrifice, sought not nor cared for
a proof of his promises. The prudent, and the desperate,
looked now for leadership to the lord of our people,
cunning in counsel, for the course we should follow
was his duty to deem in doubtful matters.
He wielded his word-ward: "As to whether this deed

was ill-done or well-done, I am unable to tell,
 nor what fate shall befall us who must fail to render
 what men have deemed to be due since the days of our forefathers.
 When a carle is killed, the custom has been ever
 that the heirs who live after him are in honour bound
 to further the feud, for father and brother
 taking violent vengeance as virtue demands.
 If the tales speak true, this tree that lies slaughtered
 160 was the guise of a god; the grievance against his slayer,
 the feud for his felling, falls then to his own kind.
 Mortals in such matters meddle at their peril!
 And what if the words of this Winfrith be true,
 and the Lord that he looks to, who laid him the task
 of wreaking his wrath on a rival for our worship
 is the wielder of the worlds? What woes shall they suffer
 who by force offend against his faithful servant?
 It were wiser to wait, watching the outcome,
 and see if the spirit-world send their own vengeance,
 170 bring ruin on the ravager; or raise to life again,
 unharmed and whole, the holy oak-tree
 in proof of their power; or by portent or sign
 grant us some guidance to what were good for us to do.
 Or if Boniface abide, blessed with fair fortune,
 and the seeds that must be sown, with no sacrifice offered
 as in the years of yore, still yield us a harvest,
 we may tell by such tokens that truth is in his claim
 that his god is the greater, and it were good for our people
 to listen to his lore and learn the new customs.
 180 Hold we our hands then from hasty actions
 that may bring us to bale, let us bide our time.
 Leave Weird to her work, for her will is more powerful
 than any mind of man or might of the gods."
 Duly we did therefore what he deemed to be best,
 and the canniest course. Some carped at this judgement
 that harmed not the hated one; yet they harkened my voice.
 For I, who of all men was most angered at heart,
 spoke for his sparing. It was to spill my own blood,
 a life that was laid down loyally and freely,
 190 this company had come there, not in cold despair
 and mirthless mockery to mangle the carcase

of a faithless foe beside a fallen tree trunk.

200 We left him aloft there, lone on the summit,
as we wandered away; and I walked down the hindmost,
on feet that felt as if fixed on backwards
as they traced out in terror a track forfended
where my weird had not willed I should walk again ever.
Coming among cottages, I cowered away furtively
to shelter in some shippon, shrank from men's dwellings
lest harm should haunt the house-roof that covered me,
or folk at fireside, affrighted at sight of me,
drive me from their doors, who was a dead man by right.
Yet there came to me kinsfolk; kindly and welcoming
led me back to lodge with them, to the life I had thought ended
when my doom dealt to me that duty now lost.
So I moved among men, and made as if to live again,
in the white-pale winter-gloom that wanly spread over
days that should not have dawned for me, and I dared not believe in
them.
It seemed, even so, that the sun's hours grew more,
or at least were no less, though lowering cloud-banks
concealed his setting and made secret his rising.

THE WORKS OF THE LORD

I walked across the shop to the grubby shelves that held the books - usually my first port of call in a secondhand shop even if I am looking for something quite different, always when I am just browsing. Books are so much cheaper secondhand and lose nothing, indeed often gain in interest, by having been used and loved by someone else. But this time I drew a blank. Mostly paperback romances, a New Testament originally given away free by the Gideons, and some old school textbooks. The only promising ones were a set of *The Complete Works of Lord Somebody-I-had-never-heard-of*, bound in leather with hand cut pages. Old but by no means antique, but then I am a reader not a collector. I took one out, browsed a little and put it down hastily - political memoirs, full of extracts from speeches he had made in the House of Lords.

Leaving the bookshelves, I looked at a few little pictures arranged on a table. Nothing much here either; mass-produced prints and some uninspired amateur water colours. But one was different; an engraving on slate of a landscape with two figures, signed with a complicated monogram I could not decipher. I picked it up casually, awkwardly, and it fell from my fingers back on to the table. The shopkeeper, who had been watching me unobtrusively since I came in, spoke for the first time.

"Hey, watch it! That's fragile."

I took it up again and examined it. Was that a crack across one corner? If so, all that had been loosened was a half-inch of blank slate, for the engraving did not extend that far. It could have been cracked before I dropped it, but on the other hand it might be my fault. Would the man demand that I pay for the damage? It might save embarrassment if I just bought the thing. I looked at the price label on the back. Yes, I could easily spare that much, and I came out of the shop with the picture in a paper bag.

Later, on a bench at the bus station, waiting for my bus home, I took out my purchase and looked at it again. The knowledge had been growing in me that I had not bought it just because I thought I had damaged it; I really liked it. At first glance it had looked amateurish, but some parts were quite vividly realistic, and there was something about the two human figures in the middle distance; something in the line of the man's arm and the angle of the woman's head, and the way they both led the eye towards what seemed to be a small building in the background, conveyed a haunting impression of - what? Tragedy? Hope? Eternity? Transience? Each of these seemed at one moment to sum up what the picture was saying, at another to be inadequate or irrelevant.

I held it up at arm's length to get an overall view. The girl sitting beside me turned and whispered excitedly to the young man on her other side, who then

leaned across and said:

"Excuse me, would you mind very much if we looked at that picture?"

He did not look dishonest, and seemed genuinely interested, so I handed it to him. He examined the engraving with a delighted smile.

"You're right! That's the same monogram as on the title page of the 'Poems'. And the picture's the second meeting between Osmond and Petronella in 'Green Springs': Look, there's the Ancient Well in the background, and that's the path to Will's cottage."

He addressed me. "Do you know what this is?" I said no. "It's by Peregrine Hawke. You've never heard of him, have you? Hardly anyone has, except for a few fans, and I happen to be one of them.

"He's my favourite novelist, and one of my favourite poets. From what I can gather, he was invalided out from the First World War with a lame leg, and became a sort of tramp, a drop-out as we'd say nowadays. Used to wander about the country, labouring, begging or poaching, and writing poems nobody would print. Only a couple of dozen were ever accepted, and the only book of his any publisher would take was those few poems collected into what they called a 'slim volume', and published without his family knowing. (Peregrine Hawke was a pen-name, of course.)"

"But you said he was your favourite novelist."

"Oh, after his grandfather died and he inherited the family title and estates he could afford to have his stuff printed privately. He dropped the pseudonym then and used his title, hoping the booksellers would stock his books out of snobbery, but it didn't do him much good. For the rest of his life he shut himself up in his castle writing his strange novels and poems and making these engravings, and never set foot outside his grounds except when the Lords were debating something he was interested in. Then he would go to London, make a long speech that no-one could understand, cast his vote and go straight home.

"He lived like that until 1937, when he died in a fire that also destroyed all his manuscripts, and most of the printed copies of his books, but a few copies must have been sold, or been given away, because they turn up now and again in attics and junk shops. I've got three of the novels, plus the 'Poems' that were printed commercially. I read them again and again, and the mood of each book seems to change with every reading, like shot silk." ("Like that picture." I thought.) "Until now, I believed that the engravings had all been lost too, but it seems at last one of them has survived."

"Does that mean I've discovered a fortune?"

"Oh, no. Just a minor literary curiosity, with no great money value. The American academics haven't taken him up, you see."

"In my opinion it's because he's so self-contained. They prefer a Tolkien or

a Joyce, full of influences and allusions they can track down and write papers about. Hawke isn't good thesis-fodder, so he doesn't get the attention I feel he deserves."

I think he could have gone on for hours, and I wouldn't have minded listening, but at that moment my bus arrived and I had to retrieve my picture and leave them, with hardly time for more than "Excuse me - Thank you - Goodbye." and a wave. But all the way home something nagged at the back of my mind. Something the young man said had rung a bell. Green Springs! That was it. Surely that title had been on one of the books in the junk shop. Had I perhaps had the bad luck to pick up the only boring book in the whole set?

Next time I was in town I went back to the shop, but the books were gone. Sold just the other day, the proprietor said.

"Was it a young man with dark hair and a beard?"

"No, it was a middle-aged bloke, American by the sound of him. He seemed very pleased with them. Were they anything special?"

I shook my head.

"A minor literary curiosity."

The picture is on my living-room wall now. Every so often my eye falls on the two figures, caught in that one moment of meeting, shorn of the past and future, like people who cast no shadow. Who are you, Osmond and Petronella? Lovers? Enemies? Conspirators? What are you saying, in your unheard words and your enigmatic gestures, and what is the significance of the Ancient Well? I might search the secondhand bookshops for ever without discovering your story. I doubt if even a professional bookfinder could help, for although the name Peregrine Hawke is now firmly fixed in my memory, I can't for the life of me remember the title he used when the novels were printed.

Of course, if that American is going to write a book about him, who knows? Perhaps he will soon be on every bookstand in paperback, and I shall learn the answers. But then you will have a value in money, and I shall grow afraid to keep such a valuable item in my home, and greedy for the things your price could buy me, and we shall part, probably never to meet again.

I think I would rather go on searching, and perhaps never solve your mystery.

WISHES

An old thorn tree stood alone on a slope. The nearest neighbours of its kind, away on the hill top, were small, weather-stunted shrubs, but this, sheltered throughout its long life by the upper part of the hill, had grown tall enough for a man entering by the gap in its ground-reaching boughs, to stand within it at his full height, unless he were very tall.

Two little girls ran towards the tree, giggling, each holding a brightly-coloured bag in her hand. They slipped inside the green wendy-house of branches.

"You put something in the tree," said the one in the dress "and wish, and your wish will come true." She crammed her last sweet into her mouth, while the one with the jeans spiked her empty bag on a thorn, took a deep breath and wished loudly for a "Sindy's-kitchen-caffy," and was already starting down the hill as the other wedged her bag firmly in a crotch and whispered briefly, her face close to the trunk.

The children were out of sight by the time the old man appeared and began to make his way slowly up the slope. Arrived before the tree, he pulled an old, frayed tie from his pocket, and tied it in a double knot round the nearest branch. He stood for some minutes, the muscles of his face working now and then as if about to say something, before at last beginning to mutter, hesitantly at first but slowly growing clearer.

"They've took her away. D'you know that? They've took her away. Into that hospital.

She's dying. She'll die there, in a strange bed, all on her own, with no-one nor nothing of her own by her.

But the doctor said she'd got to go, and the men came with the ambulance for her, and what could I do?"

"She'll be more comfortable there." they said.

"What do they know? They don't know her like I do; they haven't lived with her for near fifty years. She didn't want it. She wanted to die in her own place, and not amongst strangers.

But it's a crime to be old and poor and ill - they can put you in prison for it, take you out of your home and shut you away. You know that, do you?

You know. You know it all. Too shy even to speak her name to you, I was. But you knew; you gave her to me. She never so much as looked my way before I asked you for her, but that night she danced wi' me - and now it's fifty years nearly we've been married.

Fifty years together, her and me. We've never been parted.

And now they've gone and took her away from me; And I can't do, without her!"

He stepped up closer, within the living shade of the branches. His face was

twitching again. His hands clenched tighter and tighter and there was fear in his eyes.

"Don't let her die in that hospital: Make them get her well again if they can! But if that's not to be, at least make them let her come home, so that we can be together at the end.

You gave her to me. You gave her to me and they came and took her away! You've got to do something about it!" he said in a wheeze that might have been a shout if his lungs had had the power to utter one, pounding the trunk with his fist until he drew back with a little start and looked at the spot of blood oozing from the thorn-prick in his hand.

"That's what they used to give you in the olden days, wasn't it? All right then if that's what you want!" Fiercely he pulled back his right sleeves, jacket and shirt together, losing the shirt button, and he moved his arm with a sawing motion several times against a thorny branch, tearing skin, breaking thorns, until the tears broke out and ran from his eyes so much faster than the blood from his scratches.

At first he wept leaning his forearm against the trunk, leaving traces of blood on the dark bark, and resting his head upon it, and then sank slowly down to the tree's roots, embracing it, in silent sobbing, his face wet as if he had been walking into a rain-storm. Outside, beyond the leaves, the sun moved on its course. The man's hat had fallen among the leaf-litter, and patches of filtered warmth and cool shadows succeeded each other in possession of his bald head.

The sun was sinking, the twilight beginning to close in, when the old man lifted his head and straightened his shoulders a little. Slowly he drew a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. For a long time the tears had been running down his face into the corners of his mouth, but it was only now that he tasted the salt of them, and he dabbed with the corners of the handkerchief, blotting the wetness from cheeks and chin. Behind him a blackbird flew by, chattering. He stood up, putting on his hat, and moved away from the tree, open-handed and with a step that was firmer than when he had come. Grief was still in his eyes, but the panic, the desperation was gone. The tree, the god of those long-ago people of whom nothing else was remembered, had given him something in return for his offering; he was too tired to ask how much.

His left hand brushed the leaf-mould from his clothes and pulled down the sleeves, covering his wounded arm, as he trudged down the hill.

BEAST-BANE

Fantasy in Few Colours

It happened on a time, that a young man walked a forest way, and there came a greybeard to him, suddenly from among the trees, and greeted him. Then the youth spoke the stranger fair, asking him "What news? "

"Good news for thee, young man, for I will give thee silver, lo all this bag of silver, if thou wilt give that stone that thou wearest about thy neck. "

The young man looked on the bag and it was not small, and the coins the old one took out and showed him on his palm seemed good, but all the same he shook his head and said him nay.

"This strange-shaped stone I found in the forest where I slept three nights ago, close to the very spot where my head had lain, and kept it by me for good luck, and for the sake of the place wherein there came to me such a dream as it will be long ere I forget. For in my dream I saw a wide plain, stretching before me and on either hand to the sky's edge (behind me I saw not, for I never once looked back), and all shone silver in the full moon's light. But whiter than plain or moon itself was the great pale beast that came to stand direct in my path. Tall it towered on four pale feet, and gazed on me with eyes like steel and stars, and it opened a mouth like an endless cavern of fire, veil upon veil of vague flames and fleeting smokes. My waking mind knows not how I could have stood my ground, yet methought I walked on and turned not aside, bearing a weapon in my hand (though in waking life I have none, since I cast aside my bow, being broken and the arrows all lost), till I stood before the face of the beast and spoke high words of challenge in the speech of men.

Long we fought; longer, I deem, than I could have endured, but for some unknown aid that gave me unwonted strength, and counsel too, for I seemed to know the beast's mind ere yet it moved. When it feinted I was wary; whenever it struck I was ready and slipped aside from the blow or shrank a little aback, but never so far that I could not strike again.

But with long warring at last my strength came to the ebb. A first time, and a second, though a great paw failed still to dash me all to death, one horrid curved claw struck and tore my flesh. The wounds weakened me the more until the White Beast overbore me as a third blow glanced but hurled me to the ground, and moving forward on all fours it stood over me, filling all my sight, gleaming and terrible. And yet, though I had no thought therefore at the time, it seems to me now that even as all hope fled I was glad at heart for the strange and awful beauty of this that should destroy me. It made to lower its head upon me and, in terror of seeing those dread jaws open again to swallow me, from where I lay on ground I thrust a last blow upward into the shining fur of the White Beast's body, and felt the steel wrenched from my hand as, silent, the Beast rose up and stood on two feet like a man, unmoving, its head on high among the stars, a long time, whilst I crept aside that it should not crush me as it fell, at last, dead.

"Medreamed too how I stood by the body of the dead Beast and mourned him dearly. How should I not love thee O Beast my brother my bride, and the weapons of my hands dividing thy flesh, and thy blood in my wounds? And I dreamed how I flayed the White Beast, and clad me in his softly gleaming fell, as a spoil of battle.

Now at the dawning I that had lain down disheartened awoke rejoicing as in victory, and I found also in the place where I had lain a stone smoothly and subtly shaped, as though by art, or the wearing of the sea, and pierced through with a hole. So for the dream's and the place's sake, and because I had heard that there is luck in such things, I cut a lock of my hair and plaited a cord to put the stone upon me for an amulet. And I am not fain to part with it."

"Well," the old man said, "if thou wilt not have silver then I offer thee gold, a great chest of gold, for that same charm that lies upon thy breast."

And still the young man would not.

"For when I slept another night with this stone about my neck I had again a good dream, wherein I trod the moonlight on broad pale wings, and gazed below me over the silver and black-shadowed plain. Again the plain lay boundless, either hand, but now before me, far, far off where the earth sank beneath the sky a range of mountains showed jagged against the blue, and I fixed my eyes steadfastly upon the highest peak where I knew surely (and asked not how I knew) that dread and glorious adventure awaited me.

"And therefore I will not give thee the stone."

Then said the old man, "I will give thee a spear, a spear of silver, if thou wilt give me that stone that hangs from thy neck by a plaited thread." But again the youth naysaid him, and told his tale.

"This last night I lay again in sleep with this treasure over my heart, and a third dream came. I felt how I wore a great cloak that was both long and wide, the weight of it heavy upon my shoulders. Drenched in silver light I stood, yet looked before me into only pitch darkness, and was afraid. But then I bethought me of the charm, about my neck, and of the weapon I held in my hand; and meseemed moreover that in my dream I was no green stripling new set out to seek my fate but a warrior tried and victorious in fierce battles. And so I feared no more, but tightened my grip on my weapon and went forth."

Hardly had he done speaking before the old man spoke again, and sharply. "Because the stone hath its power, think not that what I offer is of less worth. Behold!" From beneath his cloak he took out the short and slender spear of bright metal, and held it towards the youth. "Kings have bartered their kingdoms and knights their honour for such victory-runes as are here engraved upon the shaft."

"Then," said the other, "they made but a poor bargain, for what then should their victory defend? Yet their shame need not be my folly, to lose a luck known and tested for a tale of hearsay that may play me false."

Still the old one held out the spear, and brought it closer as if to show the marks that were on it, but all at once the stone-bearer was wary of him and drew back, so that

the sudden stab went wide. Before his enemy could steady himself after the miss he of the charm had struck him a blow of his clenched fist that should have felled a greybeard to the ground, yet scarcely shook this attacker who turned on him again straightaway, casting the spear full at his heart. So had he been dead that hour but for the dreaming-stone, for the spear's point struck against the amulet, and though the brunt of it bore him backward to the earth it did not pierce his flesh. He stretched out his hand to seize the spear and in his rising flung it even as his foe made towards him. Pierced through and through, the enemy fell.

Now the victor came and stood over the ancient where he lay, still, outstretched and bloody. Who this had been he knew not, and was never to know, save that this was one who had sought to kill him, but whom he had killed. He drew out the silver spear and cleaned it in the earth, and there were indeed marks upon the shaft, but he had never seen their like before and of their meaning, if they had any, he had no understanding.

So he bore away with him the prize of his first battle and went on until he came to the skirts of the forest, and where the forest ended he entered upon a great plain that stretched before him and on either hand to the hem of the sky, and the young man looked not back, but walked on. The sun went down, leaving the sky to a moon just come to the full; and the plain all about grew silver-white, its shadows dead black.

And there came unto him a great White Beast that stood in his path and looked on him with eyes like steel and stars, and opened a mouth like an endless cavern of fire, and joy woke in his heart. The words of the challenge he had spoken in his dream came back into his mind, and he sang them forth proudly to the Beast, with spear in hand.

Long was the fight, and mighty was the Pale Beast, yet the charm-wearer had the advantage for he had fought this fight before in his dark dream and knew each move of the Beast's before it was made. So he went for long unharmed, and even a blow or two of his struck home, that from the White Beast itself here and there among its fine hairs a darkly gleaming blood began to flow. But, wounded, the Beast grew fiercer, while with time the warrior weakened, and bled being gashed and gashed again, until at last the White Beast bore the man to the ground and moved upon him to kill. And the warrior's heart sang. "How should I not love thee O Beast my brother, my bride, and the weapons of my hands dividing thy flesh and thy blood in my wounds?" and from the ground he struck upward with the spear; and with the spear, the silver spear deep in its heart the beast rose up, and stood awhile, its head among the stars, and fell.

Then the man rose and stood over the White Beast mourning and did it honour for its dread presence, and its death, and the beauty of its fur; and took that beauty for himself as spoil of war. With the spear he flayed it, and even as the strange blade touched the fell it became sweet and supple as it had been skilfully tanned. Moreover as he wrought the holed stone moved upon its thread so that it fell upon a place

where he was wounded in the fight, and because the hooked claw had rent away his clothing the charm touched the torn flesh, and there and then the wound began to mend. Seeing this the man then set the stone to every part of both his gashes, and before long they were healed altogether and showed but as two long scars that might have been earned and forgotten long ago. And now the warrior fought against his weariness no more that night, but wrapped himself in that broad fell and slept, even as the sun appearing stretched its beams across the plain and struck upon his face. And in that sleep if any dream came to him, then he remembered it not on his awakening.

The sun was past its noon when he rose and went on his way, with spear in hand and the stone about his neck, and the fell of the beast as a great mantle about him, a robe fit for an emperor, yet were it not for the loveliness of the fur, and the glory of the beast and his own glory in conquest, he had not kept it but cast it aside, for he was eager to go forth and find his fate, and the burden of it hampered his going.

Again the sun set and bright cold moonlight made the plain all ghostly about him far and near. As he walked on his way, all at once there came a broad shadow before the moon, and then on vast-spreading wings a great bird whiter than snow swooped upon him with taloned feet outstretched; but the mighty cloak, the White Beast's tribute, warded him from those claws, and the white bird rose with but a few long, shining hairs in its grasp. It wheeled about to come again, but this time the young warrior stood on guard with the silver spear and stabbed its blade toward the bird that it sheered away and harmed him not. It turned about and swooped on him again and again now with anger blazing in eyes as bright as flames. But the young man gave it battle with the rune-spear trusting to the luck that had made him conqueror before; and fiercely as the White Beast had fought, so fought the White Bird. Yet for a time they shed no blood, for the fell guarded the man from claw and beak, and on swift wings the bird swept ever aside from the point of his lance. At length he struck no more but crouched to the ground, the white mantle wrapped close about him, hiding the blade. This time the enemy did not turn aside, but it opened its pointed bill and the dark tongue shrieked out a cry to chill the heart, great and high and wild, as it fell upon him and struck its claws into the hide that folded him about, so gripping that they pierced it through and he felt the sharp points of them lightly wound his flesh. He peered with one eye between the mantle's folds and saw the pure sheen of its breast and neck as it began to rise up, bearing him off from the ground. But while his heels, skin-enwrapped, still trailed upon earth, he stretched out between the edges of the cloak one hand and the spear it held, and stabbed with it up into that whiteness and the Bird faltered, and slowly fluttered to the earth, the dark blood flowing to stain its graceful throat, and so died.

The slayer stood by it then, but made no mourn aloud, for as it died the White Bird cried out once again full strange and sad, and so the man ventured to make no death-song for the Bird for its own song was best, but with the spear he severed the wings of the Bird, and slung them upon his back, And then he touched those wings

with the magic stone, and lo! they were melded with the white fell, and the warrior's own thews swayed them. But when the wings moved upon his shoulders and he felt that they were strong the man was reminded of his second night's dream, and he let them carry him into the air, and as he soared towards the moon and stars there rose above the earth's rim upon his sight a fringe of mountain tops before the skirts of the heavens. Gazing thereon, he studied to guide the mighty wings toward them. The labour of flight went hard with him at first, but the luck that still went with him bestowed on him again new strength while by degrees he learned the ways of those wings and how to rest in air upon them like a gull.

After a while a wind came to blow in his face as if to drive him back, and first the mountains and then the plain itself disappeared little by little into blackness as a pall of cloud approached and overspread the sky, cutting off the moonlight. But as the silver light began to fade from about him he felt the power of those pinions lessen; so beating with his wings against the wind ere they failed he soared and rose up into the cloud that closed about him, touching his face and hands like cold tenuous cobwebs, he climbing still through the greyness that turned to white mist and brightened, brightened till he soared above the rack into the full light again. Higher yet he rose, until the cloud-bank stretched beneath his wings as though he passed above a country of strange mountains of slowly shifting form, guarding mysterious valleys between them; but far off among those mountains other peaks, stiller, sharper, raised their heads above their neighbours like steep rocks above the waves of the sea. Still to them he sought with winged grace and speed, that before the moon began to set below that cloud-land he had approached them nigh enough to see on the blank-white, moonlit face of that highest peak a stain, as it were a pure-black spot a little below the summit. Then the sinking moon touched that false horizon of vapour, and its rays began to come to him a little dimly through its misty fringes. With the light's weakening, once more the wings began to lose their strength. The Bird-slayer knew it, and took care, gliding swiftly down through the cloud and the darkness to earth while power was yet in the wings to hold them outspread, that he might not fall suddenly from the sky and to his death.

His feet touching ground barely stood before they stumbled and he lay outstretched. The weird strength the wide pale wings had shared with him was all gone away and the weariness it had held off from him returned many-fold, and so once more, wrapped in the White Beast's spoil he fell to sleep.

At his awakening, he knew that it was day. Though the dark was barely less than when he had lain to sleep, what light there was, surely was of the sun, for no other were bright enough to pierce the deep clouds that blotted out the sky. But how high the sun, or in what quarter, was no knowing, and little to be seen upon the face of the earth. Rising to his feet he walked forth in that way whitherward his head had lain, in hope that this must be the way he had been flying, if indeed he had flown and not dreamed merely as he had dreamed before, and it might be that, on that horizon the dark would not show to him, that way the foothills of the fated Mountains stood.

As for the white wings, many a time as he trudged afoot he had been fain to lay by that burden, both fur and feather, for they hung upon his shoulders a mere dead weight, since the moon was departed and the sunlight had nought to say to them, even in such a whisper as came from beyond that wall of grey, and often he was minded to disbelieve in their power, so strange the thought of it seemed to him now. Yet the memory would not altogether fade, nor could the knowledge of his fights be lost with the spoils of them still there before his sight, so that for the love of their beauty and pride in his conquests those tokens stayed upon his back, and though the wings lay as dead, still the mantle served to keep the cold from its master. Yet it seemed not so to the man, for the chill that came of the unchanging gloom about him and the faint muttering of wanhope that grew slow and unperceived far back in his mind.

And so when he came where a small patch of dead bushes were, he brought branches and twigs together and made a little fire, struck with the Silver Spear-point upon the Stone of Dreams. Now at last was something in his sight that was not the black and grey of the twilight weather, bright with glowing life, and his mood was cheered. But for its parentage sake, lest he be shamed to have made those dread treasures serve his purpose as common flint and steel, he plaited a small lock among the hairs of his head, and cut and gave it into that moving flame, in token of awe and in earnest of his weird, that the blade and stone were inwoven with his life in all its bounds; and after that he knew he would not yet cast off the gifts those wonders had brought him. Now he fed not the fire, but only sat by and gazed therein until it died, yet he bowed his thanks and left the ashes alone for its memorial, he departing and bearing his burden onwards on his way.

A time and a while, and as he walked the twilight about him grew more strange and ominous-looking: things that were dark now shrank altogether from sight, while all that was white, and above all that fell that he wore, came to shine lurid and clear, and he knew what was soon to befall. Soon it came to pass that far across the plain, on his right hand, he saw a jagged fork of lightning stand for brief moments between cloud and ground. But he had not foreseen, by dream nor firelight nor by weatherlore, how at the blazing of that sudden light the fair feathers ruffled as in a passing squall, as the mighty wings woke out of sleep. Thunder spoke, and ceased. Again the lightning came; at once the long pinions unfolded, reaching upwards, and in the black dark of its ceasing sank but slowly and reluctantly to rest, struggling as it were against the current, for now, instant upon the summons of a clash of thunder, followed a great rush of rain as if a river flowed there from sky to earth whose waters ran over the warrior's head and down by his hair and confused his sight, but for the rest the skin of the White Beast warded the storm wholly from his body. So quickly he raised a fold of the hide from his shoulders to draw it over his head, that not till he had done so did he feel the weight and the shape thereof, thus knowing that whereas the head-fell of his victim hereto hung at his back where he had hardly ventured to look upon it, although the dread eyes were dimmed and gone and the jaws at peace in

death, now it crowned and guarded his own brow. As a third time lightning broke forth, brighter and closer still, the Bird's strange boon leapt fiercely and upbore him in air. He fell back again at first, until the sheets and zigzag forks were following thick one on another, each scarce gone before the other came, and in their light he mounted from the earth to soar unhalting. Blinding bolts struck behind and before, but hurt him not, nor harmed a hair or plume of the wondrous cloak. A wind of speed shook the storm-rain in flurrying drops from the flaring fell. The cloud welcomed him; light and darkness came and went all about, while as he fled upward the thunder's roaring dogged him as it had been his own footsteps on stone stairs, yet each flash that dazzled the man's sight did but give those pinions might to flee its danger with its own speed, ever renewing their power to climb among the storm until he had departed from it and left it below him.

Here all was calm and clearness; a glow of a sinking sun ready to be swallowed by the storm-cloud came up from beneath the lone being who mounted before the moon that swam above the upper airs, somewhat waned now but still bright enough to call the flying pinions to full life. Before him he saw again the mountains, dread tall and still. The closer he drew to them the higher they towered, and higher yet he must rise to have his goal in sight, the peak, pale-shining but with its one spot blacker than the night, whereon his heart was set, and the air grew chill.

The sun was gone. Long now there was no sight nor voice of the storm (if it raged still below he never looked to see), but pure and radiant silence, the icy peaks among the stars, and the warrior, the White Beast's bane and the White Bird's bane, stood at last among those far and awful presences, where under the moon cold and spotless snows gleamed and sparkled all about him. But all this ended before his very face. His wings, the Bird's spoil, folded their feathers without his bidding and lay adown his back and sides, the White Beast's boon fell in heavy folds about his shoulders, and he knew his third vision. For he stood at the threshold of a huge cave. The light of the moon struck not into it; before him was only darkness. Far on either hand the entrance extended, and so high that he knew its unseen roof from the sky only by that it was starless. It might have had no roof but be the domain of somewhat that quenched the very fires of the sky; it might have no walls, no floor beyond where his feet were; for all he saw it might have ended scarce begun, with a black wall close enough to touch if he ventured to stretch out his hand, or be endless as the throat of the Pale Beast had been, but this all void of light and colour. Behind him lay sheer beauty on all sides, but he dared not look towards it, for this was the way that he should go, and beyond that dark lay the fate he had come to seek. And now, more than when he fought with the Beast or with the Bird, or when the white wings first took him from the face of earth or the thunder crowded on him in his flight, was he aghast before that emptiness. As for the spoils of war that had served his speed by moonlight, they were but a burden for this dark faring. But he called to mind the silver rune-spear, and bethought him of the holed stone that hung upon his breast and the luck he had walked in ever since he possessed it, and he feared no more. Letting fall from his shoulders the cloak that was winged, he took the silver spear in hand and went forward into the dark.

LUCK OF THE DEVIL

"FIRST-TIME PUNTER'S £½-MILLION WIN - 'Change my life? Not half!' says lucky pools winner Arthur Chance . . ." Alfie turned the page. "JAIL-BREAKER'S BRAZILIAN LOVE-NEST - Escaped villain Robin Banks, now living in luxury with beauty queen Carmen Getme . . ." Alfie closed the paper in disgust.

"Some people have the luck of the Devil." he muttered bitterly. "wish I had it!"
"Do you, really?" said a quiet voice at his elbow.

Absorbed in self-pity and his pint, Alfie had taken little notice of his fellow-drinkers, but now he turned to look at the speaker. well-dressed, well-spoken, but with something in his manner that put Alfie at his ease, suggestive of payment in 'readies' for little jobs on, or just over, the edge of the law. He could not put a name to the face, or even recall having seen it before, yet it was as familiar as if he had known it all his life. The feeling increased as the other looked him straight in the eyes, and Alfie's gaze travelled automatically to the stranger's temples. Why had not he noticed them at once? Why did no-one else in the pub seem to notice them, the two horns so conspicuous among the well-groomed hair?

"You mean - you'd fix something for me?" Old legends, half heard and, till now, totally unheeded, stirred in Alfie's memory. "Some sort of a deal?"

"Certainly. But we can't talk about it here; let's go back to my place. - Oh, don't worry - not that place' I've got a little office in the High Street I use for discussing business."

The Devil's office had an air of prosperity, of businesslike luxury, but as Alfie looked nervously around he saw nothing to suggest what kind of business was carried on there. perhaps the swiss-cheese plant in the corner looked vaguely sinister? But then, don't they all? Satan had shown him to a comfortable chair and given him a large whisky from the drinks cabinet, which Alfie was leaving untouched for the time being. On the way round here he had remembered a few more details from those old folk-tales, and thought he had better keep a clear head for the negotiations.

"I suppose it's the usual terms?" he said, as the Devil seemed to be waiting for him to begin. "You do what I want, if I sign a contract in blood to hand over my soul after so-many years?"

"No need for that." the Devil reassured him. "Just carry on as you're going and I'll be sure of getting you in the end. I'm in no hurry. Now, what can I do for you?"

"Money." said Alfie promptly. "Lots of it. I wanna be the richest man in the world."

"It's a deal. It won't happen all at once, you understand. These things take time. But you be an out-and-out sinner, and I give you my word, one day you'll be the richest man in the world. Oh, by the way, there's one thing I'm particularly fussy

about. I don't want you being got at by the other firm and persuaded to go back on our agreement. So, as long as you live, you must never read the Bible; don't even open one; never go to church, or anywhere else you might hear it read, or talk to the kind of people who might quote from it."

"Fine by me. I never do any of those things anyway. And you're sure I don't have to sign anything?"

"I'm sure I can trust you. After all, think what you stand to lose if you welsh"

It was several months later that Alfie saw his new business associate again. When he stepped out through the prison gate and looked about him, there was that same, strangely familiar figure walking casually by on the other side of the street. Alfie hurried after and confronted him.

"Here, what do you think you're playing at! Dropped me right in it, didn't you? When I started winning on the fruit machines, and then on the horses, I thought, 'This is it' He's starting to deliver the goods, I start buying a load of stuff on the strength of it and what happens? It stops coming in and I end up inside!"

"I kept telling them I meant to pay for it all, and they all said the same thing - bank manager, finance companies, the beak: Where was I going to get the money from? And I could hardly tell them, could I? Or they'd have put me in the nut-house, instead of the nick. I don't mind telling you, there were times when I was tempted to give it all up and go straight!"

Satan shook his head. "I did warn you it would take a while. I just thought I'd let you have a little bit on account. The rest will be coming to you, all in good time; you just have to wait for it, and of course stick to our agreement. And remember, any trouble anybody makes for you in the meantime is nothing to what you'll be able to make for them when you're the richest man in the world. You'll be able to do whatever you like, have whatever you want. you wouldn't really give all that up, would you?"

"No, I suppose not. But it's the nick. It gets you down." Alfie decided to push his luck. "What I need now's a really good holiday; then I'd be my old self again. Any chance of another advance?"

The Devil considered the matter. "I don't see why not." he decided. "Next week be soon enough?"

That evening, a man Alfie knew only slightly greeted him like a long-lost friend, and showed a great interest in his driving ability. It seemed he found himself suddenly short of a getaway driver for a bank job he had got planned for next week. Alfie knew that in normal circumstances the man would not have considered him for a responsibility like this. In normal circumstances, Alfie would have hesitated to accept, but this time he agreed without a qualm.

Three months later, a relaxed, bronzed and duty-freeladen Alfie was flying home from a long holiday in the Canaries. The police were waiting for him at the airport; but Alfie had had his advance, and whenever the prison chaplain tried to speak to him, Alfie looked straight past him as if he wasn't there. Many years had passed when Alfie met the Devil again face to face. There had been times when he thought he glimpsed him at a distance, or in a crowd, but he was always gone before Alfie could get near him. Little advances came, too, from time to time, and sometimes not so little, but at other times there were long waits between them.

This had been one of the worst of those times, and as the shabby old man shuffled towards a vacant bed in a charity hostel for vagrants he cursed incessantly, half under his breath. "I'll break him for that. I'll destroy him. Turned down a million quid. He, he, I told him, just one drink on the slate, and there's a million pounds in it for you when I get what's coming to me. And he threw me out. But he'll be sorry for it."

"What's he on about?" someone asked his neighbour as the newcomer passed them.

"Him? Oh, that's Moneybags. Eccentric millionaire in disguise, he is. - 'No, of course not really'. He's just a nutter. Gets a few drinks inside him and goes around telling everyone he's the richest man in the world"

That night the "eccentric millionaire" woke with a start, and a sense that there was someone standing near, watching him.

"Hallo, Alfie."

"Oh, it's you. Long time no see." The Devil did not answer, or move; he seemed to be waiting for something.

Alfie's eyes began to gleam. "This is it, is it? This is when I get all that's coming to me?"

Stiff and tired as he was, he stood up and started eagerly towards his benefactor. But he felt as if he had left something important behind, and he turned back to see what it was. A man was lying on the bed, or what had been a man. Alfie knew the face; though he seldom looked into a mirror nowadays, it had glowered back at him from many a shop window as he passed.

"Yes, Alfie. You'll get what's coming to you, all right. I'm taking you back to my place - and I don't mean the office in the High Street."

"But the money! you promised! And I've kept my side of the bargain. I've been a crook all my life, and I've never once opened a Bible since that day"

"No, you haven't, have you?" said the Devil, with an amused smile. "And it never even occurred to you to wonder what there was in it that I was so anxious you shouldn't find out about."

"The ten commandments and all that, wasn't it? All the things you're not supposed to do."

"Oh come, Alfie! You've always had a pretty good idea of what you ought not to do, and that's never stopped you doing any of it."

"Well then, I suppose it was stuff about Hell fire an' - torment an' that."

"But you'd heard about that too. You decided long ago that the game was worth the candle."

Alfie racked his brains to remember what else there was in the Bible. He had conceived an irrational hope that, if he guessed the right answer before some predetermined time was up, he could still win the big prize.

"I know! Of course, Jesus dying for our sins!"

The Devil's sardonic grin grew wider with each answer. "And when did you ever worry about letting someone else take the rap for you, if you could get away with it?"

"I'll set your mind at rest, shall I?" He turned away, and Alfie's ghost, growing more nervous the further he went from his body, felt compelled to follow him to a corner he had always religiously, or rather irreligiously, avoided, where the organization that ran the hostel had covered a table with a collection of religious tracts, and a Bible or two. "Take a look. It can't make any difference now. You only promised for as long as you live, remember?"

He amused himself with watching the ghost's fingers slip uselessly through the solid book, before picking it up and holding it out to him, opened unerringly at the right page.

"There you are, John, chapter eight, verse forty-four", and Alfie began to read,

"Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own . . .". Alfie's ghostly jaw dropped lower than that of the corpse lying on the bed, but the familiar, well-modulated voice took over from him:

" . . . for he is a liar . . .".

This little book is dedicated to the memory of my dear daughter, Patricia. The title is taken from a song by J. R. R. Tolkien which she requested should be played at her cremation.

The full text of the song is printed below, and is a testimony to her faith that this world is not the end.

M. A. Masson.

IN WESTERN LANDS

In western lands beneath the sun
The flowers may rise in Spring,
The trees may bud, the waters run,
The merry finches sing.

Or there, maybe, 'tis cloudless night,
And swaying beeches bear
The eleven stars as jewels white
Amid their branching hair.

Though here at journey's end I lie,
In darkness buried deep,
Beyond all towers strong and high,
Beyond all mountains steep,
Above all shadows rides the sun,
And stars forever dwell,
I will not say the day is done
Nor bid the stars farewell,
I will not say the day is done
Nor bid the stars farewell.