

ESTHER M. FRIESNER

A BELTAINE AND SUSPENDERS

I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU say, Olivia; it's no natural place." John Herrick, Vicar of Staddle-upon-Truss, dashed the papers onto the pew beside him and lifted his well-chiseled chin in a manner straight out of the more popular female romances.

To the casual observer, Father Herrick did not seem a typical servant of the Lord, unless it were Lord Byron.

"You dropped one," said Telemachus Battle-Purfitt, frantically wiggling long, pale fingers at the errant sheet.

The vicar retrieved the page and gave it a superficial glance. "Oh, that's merely a copy of an especially intriguing passage from the Stilby-Nash. You may have it for your records, if you like. I've the original." He offered it to Telemachus.

"No, no thanks, nonono, not to bother." Telemachus fairly gasped out the words, backpedaling swiftly until his shoulders were nearly pressed flat against the bizarre mural on the parish church wall which he had been at such pains to uncover and restore for these past seven months. Flakes of plaster clung to his jacket and blobs of freshly applied tempera stained his cuffs, but it did not seem to matter to him so much as his successful escape from accepting the vicar's paper.

"Do give it up, Father John," said Olivia Drummond in her clear, capable voice. In heavy walking tweeds and thick brogues, she lounged against another pew as if she were the squire of some rural seat come to exercise political bonhomie by mixing with the locals at the pub. "He won't touch a thing that's been on the floor, even if it is a consecrated one. You know our Tilly and germs."

A weak smile fairly doubled over Telemachus' meagre-fleshed face. "Just a precaution," he quavered, scampering back up the scaffolding to the safety of his scrapers and palette knives. "Mummy says one never knows, especially after all those London mites trampling through the house."

Father Herrick stacked his papers smartly. "I don't know why your mother ever agreed to take in so many city kids during the Blitz, old boy. Not if it was half the strain you paint it."

A spark of alien fire kindled in Telemachus' shallow blue eyes, a fugitive Bolt of gumption striking his book-curved spine abruptly stiff. "Whatever her personal feelings in the matter, Mummy has never been known to shirk the performance of her duty."

"Too right." Olivia laughed until her skinny shoulders shook beneath their burden of woven wool. "England expects, but Lady Battle-Purfitt forestalls. Oh, don't look at me that way, Tilly! You know I'd die before disdaining your

sainted mummy's devotion to what's expected of her in this world. In fact, I'd give a good deal to meet her. Admirable woman. She saved those poor little guttersnipes from the German bombs all the same, whether she did it out of Christian charity or because it went with the image of lady of the manor."

"They were just so . . . unsanitary." Telemachus shuddered. He daubed at a badly faded section of the mural with a camel's hair brush. "So precocious, too."

"Don't tell us again about how your mother caught a pair of them making the beast with two backs in the pergol." Olivia strolled up to the scaffolding and rested an elbow on the wooden frame. Telemachus gave a small squawk to feel the timbers shake ever so slightly and Olivia desisted.

"How could they?" Telemachus shook his head, patting his bedewed brow dry with a folded pocket handkerchief. "They were only infants!" A hot flush overwhelmed his sallow cheeks. "And I do not wish to discuss such--such carnal matters while we are under this sacred roof!"

"Don't fret about Miss Drummond's choice of language for my sake, Telemachus," the vicar replied with a superior chuckle. "I am quite understanding, even if the Church is not. Back to the soft. It always proves to be too much for your urbanized souls, no matter the age. The ancient fertility of the land. The Great Mother's siren song. I'm not at all surprised. Your neck of the woods is rife with nodes of chthonic power, Telemachus. Doesn't a day go by that some young sprig of a folklorist isn't discovering a strangely isolated village in the hinterlands whose inhabitants still cling stubbornly to the Old Religion, bound to the earth by more than a tenant's agreement, serving arcane and ageless deities, worshipping the fructifying forces in ways that aren't quite C. of E." He lifted one corner of his perfect lips in a knowledgeable smile. "Don't look so altogether scandalized, it's only good business practice to familiarize oneself with the competition."

"Oh, for pity's sake!" Exasperation made Olivia's cheesy complexion acquire just the hint of color along the hatchet-blades of her cheeks. "The Great Mother had no more to do with it than my mother. These so-called 'kids' Tilly's mum caught having it off in the pergola were a hot young village stallion of about twenty and the sixteen-year-old sis of one of the Blitz babies. She had dugs like a pair of V-1's and the morals of a Corn Goddess! Lady Battle-Purfitt doused the pair of them with the contents of her watering can, hauled them off to the village church, and stood guard over'em with a loaded reticule until the banns were read and they were safely married." She strode the length of the nave like Nelson traversing the deck of the Victory, then added, "Besides, Kingsfield-on-Ouse is hardly the fertility-mad hinterland you're so daft for. It's in Sussex!"

Father Herrick's classically handsome face remained impassive. "So is this other village I've been talking about. Lies within hailing distance of Kingsfield, as

a matter of fact, in a thickly forested part of the mountains, or so my sources say."

"Mountains?" Olivia echoed, her voice pitching itself all the higher to reflect her outright skepticism. She threw herself into the pew beside Father Herrick and slapped the velvet cushions until dust motes streamed skyward. "Mountains in Sussex? Really, Vicar, next you'll be speaking of French modesty and American etiquette."

"Mountains." Father Herrick remained firm. "I said it was no natural place, did I not? Yes, mountains, and bristling with the ageless, bearded giants of the wildwood such as have not been seen on our shores since the misty dawning of the Druids' reign."

"Druids did not ever reign. You know as well as I that they were teachers, healers, advisors to the chieftains --"

"Olivia, it was a trifle of poetic exaggeration on my part, no more," Father Herrick replied.

"Like the mountains?" she countered archly.

He sighed. "You've no use for romance, do you?"

Olivia's raucous laugh had a barking undertone that had temporarily cleared the church steeple of its resident family of ravens many times before this. "Rubbish," she said in brief. "Which is the sum of my opinion concerning this." With a jab of her brittle fingernail she skewered the slim pamphlet presently lying dead-center between the two of them on the musty pew.

It was not a very prepossessing example of the printer's art, to be sure. Its creamy paper was covered with a chain mail of rings left by the damp bottoms of uncounted pint measures. In places these careless attentions had caused the ink to run, yet one could still easily read the words, A Monograph Inquiring into the Obscure Ritual Practices and Beliefs of Greater Ambrose Surlesard, with Special Reference to the Mayday Cycle of Forbidden Rites, by Lord William Stilby-Nash, 1848.

Gently Father Herrick rescued the document from Olivia's impalement. "Then I take it you decline to accompany me."

"What? And miss seeing mountains in Sussex?" Olivia chuckled, a marginally sweeter sound than her abrasive laugh. Then she turned suddenly serious.

"Look, Vicar, I still don't believe the natter you've dished out about finding this little gem of the printer's art in a barrow on Portobello Road last Sunday fortnight, but if you're willing to lay yourself open to the finger of scorn by mounting an expedition to Greater Whatsis, who am I to pass up the opportunity for a bit of an excursion? I'm at least as keen a preservationist and scholar of old folkways as yourself, although without half your opportunities for

publication."

"And here I thought you did the work for love, Miss Drummond," the vicar remarked with rather a nasty insinuating tone. What it was specifically intended to insinuate remained a mystery, but it was unarguably nasty.

"I think you ought to come with us, Miss Drummond," Telemachus put in, none too boldly. "Certainly after all you've contributed to the interpretation of the mural. There is a connection to be discovered, I feel it."

"Perhaps," said Olivia, pushing off from the pew and lunging back for the wall where the mural waited. It was just such a land-devouring stride that had brought her afoot down from London to Staddle-upon-Truss, solely on the casual comment of a friend who was, like Olivia, a spinster of independent means who filled her life with the holy mission of seeking out and salvaging her nation's fading native traditions.

"Oh, look, a letter from Tilly," Rowena had said, holding the onionskin inches from her nose. "His pa and mine used to go up to Scotland together to do horrid things to salmon. You'd probably like him, Livvie. Tolerate him, anyway. He's clear mad on the old musty-rustles, too, and he writes that he's found something worth nosing into in the old church at Staddle. Won't say what, the mean creature."

That had been enough for Olivia, and she had set off. The something proved to be the wall painting which she found Telemachus Battle-Purfitt in the throes of restoring to its original brilliance. Father John Herrick was in splendid attendance, digging up a wealth of documents and making frequent researching forays to Oxford, Cambridge, and London while his milk-blooded curate tended to the spiritual health of the Staddlefolk.

Olivia was immediately fascinated by what she saw. Being Olivia, she immediately presented her credentials as an amateur student of old folkways and preservationist of endangered cultural treasures. Her privately printed collection, *Neglected Stirpicultural Carols of Yorkshire*, so impressed the Ladies' Altar Guild that there was no need for her to follow it up by flourishing *Evocae, Aristaeus! An Inquiry into Certain Chthonic Rites in Somerset Apiculture*. Mrs. Threadneedle, the chairwoman, made haste to admit her to the work site and even went so far as to mention her interest to the vicar.

They formed an unlikely triptych, those three-- the aging bluestocking, the dapper vicar, and the skittish aesthete-- but at heart they were all cut from the same clay. The ancient folkways of England called to them, albeit the call came ever more and more faintly since the war, as the plowlands grew depleted of their young blood and the new generation swarmed over the cities instead. From village to village Olivia Drummond traveled, grim as death with a hangnail, ruthlessly hunting down the sui generis ram-gelding song, the rare swan-upping work-chant, the dotty Oldest Inhabitant who, for a pint or two (or seven), might be persuaded to relate a venerable cradle tale that began, "Arrrh, them wunt

go

far enoo tha' wheels, but th' piskies did frummish 'um t'be 'is gawthmodder's cat an' britches."

Olivia had to admit, helping out on this church mural project was rather more restful and just as fulfilling as jotting down dialect-and.spit-encrusted ramblings. Telemachus was the only one to touch the painting itself, but as more

and more of the work came to light he graciously permitted Olivia and the vicar--to have a hand in interpreting the inscriptions.

"It still reminds me of the Bayeux Tapestry," she remarked, looking up at the section which was completely restored. It was an understandable association to make. The figures of men, women, and angels were all done in the Norman style, long-fingered hands cupped as if to catch the words scrolling from their mouths.

At their feet and over their heads were creatures divine and diabolical, grotesques and fancies of the artist's mind, most of these scaled and crawling.

"It reminds me of an infestation of newts we once suffered through the vicarage, before we got piped water," said Father Herrick. "Look, even the ones in the sky are just so many salamanders with wings."

"Do you think --" Telemachus stammered, "-- do you think they might be dragons?"

The vicar sniffed. "Fairly pitiful dragons, if so. But quite in keeping with my theory concerning Greater Ambrose. Look here, Miss Drummond--" he rose and approached the mural, picking up a slender lathe with which to indicate those points to which he referred. "Your Latin is almost as good as mine, and Telemachus took a First in Classics at Oxford. We all came up with the same translation, did we not?" He aimed the lathe at a banner of text running along the lower edge of the painting.

"'Here Saint Augustine departs from Estadium, having converted many,'" Olivia read once more. "That would be Staddle, I'd expect. 'Here Saint Augustine returns to Estadium, to warn the people. Here Saint Augustine relates much of how he came to Ambrosius Magnus, and of the evil rites, and of the lizards.' Hmm. Augustine may have done a bang up job of converting the Angles, but this just sounds like he was a failed Saint Patrick. Must've run into a plague of reptiles -- one of my Wiltshire informants told me he remembered something like

that during spring thaw in the Jubilee year, although there were precious few times that old geezer wasn't seeing snakes. When Augustine couldn't drive 'em off, rather than admit it was due to some lacking of holy worth on his part and

queering the whole conversion assignment, he spread scurrilous stories about the

hamlet in question. Pretty good stories, if the folk here thought enough of 'era

to immortalize the incident on the church wall."

"But don't you see, Miss Drummond?" Father Herrick rapped his lathe so vigorously against the wall that it snapped. Poor Telemachus yelped and scurried

down to check his precious painting for damage. "Saint Augustine did not

prevaricate! The connection is all here: the unnatural rites, the overwhelming representation of a reptilian presence such as has been bag and baggage of all self-respecting fertility cults since time began, the specific reference to lizards. The linguistic clues could not be more blatant. And this mural is documentary evidence that the arcane practices of Greater Ambrose Surlesard were

old even when Duke William the Bastard's reign over England was young! When we speak of Saint Augustine's conversion of the Angles, we are speaking of the sixth century!"

"So we are." Olivia thrust her hands into the pockets of her Norfolk jacket.

"I

still don't see that we're speaking of survivals of antique fertility rites in the Sussex mountains!"

Telemachus looked up from where he had been frantically retouching the results of the vicar's too-emphatic nature. "But -- but that's what we might discover if

we make the journey. I'm certain Mummy wouldn't mind us popping by for a visit.

If I wire her first. Short notice, but-- but I don't think she'd -- I'll do it as soon as I may. She ought to be expecting me, it being so close to Christmas,

and the festive season should -- should smooth the way clear for you two to join

me. It --"here he crept back toward the abandoned pew and brought his own finger

perilously close to the monograph -- it does say that the author spent a night in Kingsfield before proceeding to Greater Ambrose."

"It doesn't say how much he drank that night," Olivia jibed. "If we err and under-imbibe I'm afraid we won't be able to see Greater Ambrose at all. But never mind, I'm game. I did say I'd like to meet your mum, Tilly. And if this is

a joke on your part, Vicar, at least you've the decency to get caught up in it yourself."

"I do not consider the investigation of such practices as Stilby-Nash hints at to be any sort of joking matter." Father Herrick produced a primed and loaded Meerschaum and sucked doggedly on the stem. "I have done some preliminary research and learned that his lordship was a well-respected amateur ethnologist

in his day. A bachelor by choice after the death of his intended bride, he sunk

himself alternately in the study of English folklore and the doing of good works

for his parish. Therefore his unexpected and complete vanishment from all public

ken shortly after the first of May, 1848, was remarked and lamented in the local

press and church records."

"What-- what happened to him?" Telemachus bit his thumb and made small, inarticulate sounds of agitation that crescendoed in a bleat of dismay when Father Herrick replied:

"He was last heard of in a village inn in Sussex which marked the last leg of his walking tour. The innkeeper claimed that his lordship told various people in

the common room that he was heading homeward from Greater Ambrose. He then

went  
upstairs to his room. In the morning he was gone and all that was found was  
the  
manuscript from which this monograph was later published as a memorial by Lord  
Stilby-Nash's friends and associates."

"He . . . vanished?" Telemachus' voice shrilled out of control and he lost all  
mastery of his sweat glands.

"Oh, now see what you've done!" Olivia exclaimed impatiently. "You've sent  
poor  
Tilly all rabbity. There, there, Tilly. No offense, but it wasn't the first  
time  
one of the gentry skipped out on his host without paying the bill. He probably  
shinnied down the ivy -- these rural inns are positively swarming with ivy --  
and fell down an abandoned well shaft or something while trying to find his  
way  
to the London coaching station in the dark."

Telemachus sniveled just a bit before daring to ask whether Olivia really  
thought that might be the case. She assured him it must be, and further  
comforted him by promising to keep him safe from any wandering well shafts in  
the vicinity when they took off after the fierce, fructiferous citizens of  
Greater Ambrose Surlesard.

"Besides, as you yourself said, we must investigate. We owe it to posterity,"  
she wheedled, and by this and comparable appeals to the Battle-Purfitt sense  
of  
duty she brought him around.

They traveled down to Sussex the next morning. Olivia, in a fit of whimsy, had  
chosen to do her holiday shopping while in Staddle, with an eye to returning  
to  
London in time for Christmas. As a result of the Dickensian excess the  
Yuletide  
always evoked in her soul, her baggage had evolved from a simple rucksack for  
easy cross-country hiking to a swarm of bulging valises and portmanteaus  
bought  
in Staddle High Street to contain her acquired freight of gifts. She had  
thought  
it was a fine idea to take the whole jumble of luggage along with her on the  
expedition, intending to be most efficient by returning directly home from  
Sussex. After many qualms, she even went so far as to purchase herself an  
evening gown, so as not to appear at Lady Battle-Purfitt's table  
inappropriately  
dressed. She assumed that Tilly and the vicar would be likewise burdened with  
at  
least a steamer trunk between them. To her chagrin, she found them awaiting  
her  
on the railway platform bearing a rucksack apiece, no more, and those far  
smaller than her own.

Fortunately, Lady Battle-Purfitt had a car waiting to pick them up on arrival.  
The family manor of Earl's Benefice, much diminished by the family fortunes  
and  
the late war, was still a picturesque locale enhanced by an Adam house of  
considerable taste and beauty. Her ladyship was constructed along similar  
lines,  
being an attractive if formidable woman whose whole demeanor was one of  
tenacity

and purposefulness. When she informed her guests at the dinner table that they were to keep the windows of their bedrooms open throughout the night, so as to benefit from the bracing nature of the country air, even the normally headstrong

Olivia heard herself chirping rhapsodic agreement over her ladyship's mandate that all beneath the manor roof freeze to death in their sleep. Ill-at-ease in her new gown, which showed off a far more spectacular wealth of rose-petal bosom

than her quotidian tweeds ever dared imply, she was already feeling the first frissons of impending frostbite in the most inconvenient places.

Perhaps it was the vicar's desire to stave off so chilly a demise that brought him tiptoe to the door of Olivia's room just as the buhl clock on the mantelpiece struck one. The door did not creak as he gently pushed it open, then

drew it softly closed behind him. The bare parquet floor exhaled no more than a

whisper as his stockinged feet glided over its polished surface. Even the great

canopied featherbed with its antique velvet curtains uttered not a groan of protest as he insinuated himself beneath the eiderdown, putting an additional strain on the roped underpinnings.

Olivia, however, hit him so hard that the sharp reverberation of open palm to cheek reached all the way down the corridor to Telemachus' room, leaving that poor soul a quiver with the fear that the supposed thunderclap that had roused him from sleep presaged an unseasonable storm.

"What's the matter with you?" Father Herrick demanded, cupping his smarting face.

"Oh, I like that," Olivia sneered. "Come traipsing into my room uninvited, into my bed, no less, and there's something wrong with me?"

"I should say there is," Father Herrick countered. "Or so the rumors run."

"What rumors?"

"Speculations, rather. Staddle-upon-Truss is a fine village for their cultivation. Unless you've got her pretty well hidden, mules are a rarity."

"At the risk of disrespect to the cloth, you're blithering. Why would I want to hide a mule?"

"Why would you want to be one?" he replied. "Perhaps it's that men aren't to your taste, and in that case there have been the normal conjectures as to who might be your Sapphic counterpart."

Olivia stiffened with indignation. "How dare you!" What would have been shouted

was instead hissed, out of deference to the hour and fear of provoking a scene that would fetch Lady Battle-Purfitt. "Just because a single woman chooses not to-- to give a cornfield frolic to any man who asks her, you accuse her of all sorts of things."

"Really, Olivia, you're pouring a gallon of outrage into a dram measure." Even in the dark, the off-kilter gleam of Father Herrick's toothy leer was visible. "I hope you haven't mistaken my simple expediency for any sort of genuine



attraction. Frankly, with your looks, I wouldn't wager you've had that many offers to do more in a cornfield than frighten crows."

He stepped away from the bed before she could catch him a box on the ear and made for the door with the casual, smug gait of a town's only tomcat. Hand on the brass knob he paused to add, "And given my own appearance--which not a few of my more tender-natured female parishioners have found to be acceptably appealing --you've just passed up the opportunity of a lifetime. Oh well, that's the last time I go in for charity work. Good night, Olivia. At least you can still read about fertility."

Breakfast the next morning was an affair of damp and foggy silences, despite the bright Yuletide greens which graced the room. Her ladyship affected not to notice Olivia's moroseness, Father Herrick's smooth disdain, or her own son's insomnia-ravaged eyes. A hostess had her duty to her guests, which duty included making light, amusing, but not frivolous conversation at meals. If set down in the midst of a charnel house and designated hostess to the dead by whatever whimsical Power, Lady Battle-Purfitt would set herself to drawing out the corpses.

"Telemachus tells me you are quite the authority on ancient British fertility rituals, Miss Drummond," she said to Olivia.

"Quite ancient," came the all-too-meaning, uninvited comment from Father Herrick.

Olivia ignored him. "I have written a number of books on the subject, Lady Battle-Purfitt," she replied. "All privately printed. You won't have heard of any of them."

"You might be surprised, Miss Drummond," her hostess returned. "I have always felt that it is a mother's duty to take a lively interest in the occupations of her children. As my late husband, Lord Beaufort Battle-Purfitt, was carried off untimely by an architectural mishap -- he was inspecting the family chapel and a squinch fell on him -- our own issue was limited to Telemachus."

"The end of the line," Father Herrick murmured just loudly enough so that Olivia could hear but her ladyship could not. "The burgeoning of Telemachus Battle-Purfitt: There's a project for the fertility enthusiast."

Lady Battle-Purfitt went on to say, "Of course I have asked Telemachus to recommend to me any number of significant and informative books which might enhance my familiarity with his chosen field. He is quite taken with your scholarship. Your work, *Bow Bells Beltaine: An Examination of Magna Mater Worship Survivals in Cockney Parlance*, was fascinating. Now Telemachus tells me that you have come to this neighborhood to pursue research. I couldn't be more excited."

Her manner of utterance belied her words. Though her tongue might prate of rapture at the prospect of an ethnological expedition taking off from her own back yard, figuratively speaking in truth Lady Battle-Purfitt's expression and demeanor were about as animated as a scuppered haddock.

On the other hand, her son had enough enthusiasm for the both of them and a kennel's worth of Yorkshire terriers thrown in. "Oh yes, Mummy, it's to be ever so marvelous! I was a trifle apprehensive about the whole business back in Staddle, but now--" he giggled " -- now I do find it rather titillating. The sense of peril and all that, you know."

"Peril?" Now there was a glimmer of true emotion that had somehow managed to storm the barricades of Lady Battle-Purfitt's impregnable aplomb. "Telemachus, you never told me there was any peril involved. As I understand it, you go somewhere and you scrape the plaster off a church wall until something surfaces or they throw you out. Either that or you nose out some old people and you have them sing you some dreadful ballads with half the words in a dialect thicker than grapefruit marmalade. My opinion has always been that the gaffers make up those silly, picturesque lyrics as a joke and laugh all winter about how they pulled the wool over the eyes of you poor, gullible researchers. No offense meant." She said this last in a way intended to convey the idea that there had better not be any offense taken if some people knew what was good for them. "Where is the peril in that?"

"No peril, your ladyship," Olivia said soothingly. "None at all."

Lady Battle-Purfitt's eye narrowed. "Are you calling my son a liar? Under my roof? After what I have reason to believe was an excellent dinner and a passable breakfast? I am asking merely for my own information, you understand."

The barricades were down, there was no escape. Rotter though he was, even Father Herrick retained a large enough measure of compassion for a cornered lady to come to Olivia's aid.

"Your ladyship, your son spoke the truth."

"Ha!"

"As did Miss Drummond."

"Ha ?" Lady Battle-Purfitt's clear gray eye housed an armory of skewering glances of all calibers, rather an ocular version of the Swiss Army knife. Now she selected an especially keen exemplum of the species and gave it to Father Herrick right in the pineal gland. "Either there is peril or there is not. Which in turn means that either my son is a liar or Miss Drummond is -- not the perfect guest." She could think of nothing worse to say about a person. "There can be no two ways about it, Vicar. Zen has no place in Sussex."

"I simply meant that both of them have told you the conditional truth, your ladyship." Father Herrick had a facile tongue and used it to good advantage now. "We go forth this morning in search of the small and somewhat obscure village of Greater Ambrose Surlesard. The peril hinges on when we come back."

"Greater Ambrose 'somewhat obscure'?" her ladyship echoed. "Tosh. Why, that's just up the road from here. Simply everyone knows of it. They have the most charming, old-fashioned harvest fair miles about. During the late war, I took

the city children there on several occasions, to share in the wholesome village entertainment."

"Did you?" One of the vicars black brows rose, both his blue eyes waxed sharp with interest. "Ah . . . of what sort?"

Lady Battle-Purfitt puffed out her cheeks and shrugged. "Oh, the usual: jumble sales, church bazaars, Maypole romps, Guy Fawkes' Day -- such a lovely Guy the Ladies' Aid committee made, all of wicker-- Morris dances, the blessing of the cornfields --"

Telemachus made a queer, strangled sound in his shallow chest, which caused his mother's brow to beetle into a scowl of blackest dye.

"Well, my dear Lady Battle-Purfitt, there you have the answer for yourself," Father Herrick said swiftly.

"Have I?" The lady looked doubtful. "Might you tell it me, just to make sure?"

In full pedantic modus operandi, Father Herrick leaned back in his chair, fingers steepled, eyes casually lifted to the artfully frescoed ceiling as if to trace the random swoops and flutters of the Muse. "It is a sad but true condition of our calling that most otherwise well-educated people believe that the only souls who risk life and limb for the sake of folkloric knowledge are those who do fieldwork among savage aborigines. Too few are privy to the fact that the greatest danger any good preservationist may face lies within the borders of Britain herself."

"Does it," said Lady Battle-Purfitt. She rose from her place and consulted the covered dishes on the sideboard. "Then you will be wanting more kippers before you leave this morning."

Father Herrick purposefully ignored her most courteous scorn. "Scoff how they may -- and the skeptic is never a lonely soul in this cold age, believe me-- still the doubters and deriders have no satisfactory explanation for the inordinate number of ethnological amateurs in Britain proper who have vanished, refused to return home, or grown too embarrassingly deranged even to make acceptable tenured faculty members at American universities. I cite as one example the case of Horace Rosswell."

Telemachus made another of those horrid little sounds as of a mouse meeting its Maker in a drainpipe. His mother turned to him. "Am I to take it by these outlandish utterances that you are familiar with the fate of this Rosswell person, Telemachus? Or haven't you been taking your iron tonic?"

"Horace Rosswell was one of the finest minds in our field, Mummy." Telemachus traced eccentric patterns in the tablecloth with his grapefruit spoon. "Then, one fateful autumn, he heard of a strangely isolated village in Northumberland which was supposed to host a marvelously antiquated October festival in honor of the new ale. He arrived during the third week of that month, intending to remain just for the festival. Unforeseen motor trouble prevented him from leaving before All Hallows' Eve." The spoon's serrated tip tore a sudden gash in her ladyship's fine linen breakfast cloth. "He was never seen again."

"His notebooks, however, were retrieved from a bog near Dublin," Olivia finished the tale. "The last entries were very telling."

"There are parts of this country where the Old Ways survive," Father Herrick pronounced. "Places off the beaten path where the ancient forces hold sway, where jealous gods of old demand blood-sacrifice at the price of their indulgence, where the paramount fertility of the earth is to be purchased at whatever price, where Christianity is but an empty word in the mouth of a local clergyman whose true robes of office are white and who knows his mistletoe, where the newly reaped field drinks the blood of the Summer King, where the Great Mother in her many forms demands the seed of heroes, where --"

"And do you mean to say that Greater Ambrose is such a -- such a socially undesirable place? Really, Vicar!" Lady Battle-Purfitt was pleased to look smug.

"I have come and gone from that village a score of times in the past year alone, and I have never come away with anything worse than a touch of dyspepsia. Rationing or no rationing, those ladies simply do not know how to make a decent toad-in-the-hole."

"Toads indeed," said Father Herrick darkly. "And snakes no doubt, and other creatures whose natural construction places them in unremitting physical contact with the Goddess' fertile bosom. My lady, I have observed danger lies not so much in where one goes as in when. Our unhappy London brethren learned that one may walk a certain street a hundred times with no harm done, yet walk that same street at the moment when a stick of incendiaries is en route earthward and the results will be quite strikingly different. The pagan year has its festivals just as we have our Christian feasts. It was, in fact, in an attempt to hold onto those new made converts whose adherence to the established Church might still be wobbly that the authorities moved many of our holidays, secular and religious, to overlap and overwhelm theirs. Thus All Hallow's Eve displaces the Druid's solemn Samhain rites, and May Day frolics supplant Beltaine. Even this holy season of the year replaces their Imbolc celebrations and the marking of the dread Winter Solstice."

"Except they haven't replaced them everywhere!" Telemachus blurted. "It's places like this Greater Ambrose where they still put on the genuine article. I know Imbolc's just a sheep-shearing festival, but from what I've read, these Druids are a very privacy-loving lot and--Oh, Mummy, I don't think they're at all fond of spies."

"Stuff," said Lady Battle-Purfitt. Unimpressed and unperturbed, she addressed her child: "You had an uncle thought he was a Druid, once. He claimed it was a moment of spiritual enlightenment. What's so enlightening about motoring over to Stonehenge or Avebury of a summer's dawn and frolicking around starkers, I'd like to know. Personally, I think it was just his pitiful hope of getting

lashings more, ah, physical, urn, carnal, er, libidinous --"

"Sex?" said Olivia helpfully.

Shortly thereafter, Father Herrick and Telemachus joined her at the gates of Earl's Benefice with the luggage.

"It's all right, Olivia," Telemachus assured her. "Mummy says we can still stay over for Christmas on our way back. You just have to stay in the porter's lodge and take your meals there."

Olivia did not choose to acknowledge her ladyship's generosity with more than a snort of her thin nostrils. "Couldn't spare us the motor, I see," she said with pointed bitterness.

"No need for it, really. Greater Ambrose isn't all that far from here. Walking distance, Mummy says."

"Don't make me laugh, Tilly! It's supposed to lie smack in the bosom of a bally mountain range. Do you see any mountains?." She threw her arms wide.

Telemachus admitted he did not.

"Besides, you were brought up here. Do you even recall anyone mentioning mountains in the area?"

"N-no."

"Nor a village called Greater Ambrose Surlesard either, I'll be bound."

"True, true."

"Well, then!" Olivia concluded, triumphant. "Let's be charitable, and assume that all your mother's prattle of field trips to view the jolly immolation of the Greater Ambrose wicker man are just the fabrications of a mind with too little to do and not much with which to do it."

"Our gracious hostess had mind enough to provide us with directions for reaching the village, nonetheless," said Father Herrick, consulting the closely written back of a greengrocer's bill. "We shall follow them."

"You're as potty as she is!" Olivia snapped.

Father Herrick gave her a patronizing smile. "My dear Olivia, no one is forcing you to tag along. Feel free to go. The City and all its manifold delights await you. Look, here's your luggage, and the trains to London run with astonishing regularity."

"And how am I to reach the railway station from here?" she demanded.

"Perpedes apostolorum. Shank's mare. On the heel and toe." The grin widened.

"I

sincerely doubt whether her ladyship would feel disposed to place her motor at your service after that bolt of improper language you loosed over the kippers. Ergo, one must make do."

"See here, I don't mind a little walk-- thrive on 'em, as a rule -- but not with all this to shoulder." She kicked the rather large valise which held her seasonal finery, as well as the more portable rucksack containing her research equipment. The smaller cases stuffed with presents, some fragile, were for that very reason immune from her brief access of temper. "I can not carry all this to the railway station, and I will not leave it behind, unattended."

Telemachus crept forward and timorously laid hands upon two of Olivia's larger satchels. "I'll carry it for you if you come with us," he piped.

"Oh, very well."

It was a fine day for a hike, the air crisp, the vantage clear. The trio found themselves compelled to take frequent rests, to allow poor chivalric Telemachus to regain his breath as he toiled along with the luggage. Olivia carried her own rucksack and the two smaller valises, Father Herrick limited himself to his own rucksack, the boxed lunch, and the burden of spirituality.

It was during one of these pauses for refreshment that the fog rolled in. It was quite a thick fog, not at all the sort of meteorological phenomenon one expected in Sussex, at that time of year, over such topological features, and with so little warning. As a matter of fact it did not so much roll in as drop from above, with a nearly audible thud, as if some unseen Power On High had elected just that moment to let fall a bale of celestial cotton upon the earth.

"Well, I must say, I like this," said Olivia, peering through the miasma with vision blurred by dew-hung lashes.

"Please don't whine, Miss Drummond." Father Herrick stopped to consult the reverse of the greengrocer's bill. "Albeit the going has become a trifle less conducive to an overaged school girl's merry holiday, I still know exactly where we are and am fully capable of bringing us to where we are going."

"Know all the ins and outs don't you?" Olivia sniped. "Very well, then; lead on."

So he did. It was not a friendly road. The comfort of treading level beaten earth vanished into the eruption of a multitude of rocky blemishes underfoot, a road that simultaneously turned stony and steep without suitable geological preamble or excuse. Olivia marched on, trading her smaller bags for poor Telemachus' bulkier load out of simple Christian charity. The fog remained impenetrable to the eye, though all around her she believed she scented the unmistakable exhalation of dead leaves, rotting acorns, moldering bark and sprouting fungi.

"It smells like we're in a forest," she announced with some amazement.

"Do you see any forest, Miss Drummond?" the vicar inquired, an edge to his words.

"In this fog? I couldn't see my own face if I held up a mirror at arm's length."

"His mercy endureth forever," Father Herrick intoned, using Scripture much as other men might use a small bludgeon. "Perhaps when the fog lifts, you shall see that all of your doubts concerning the monticuline and sylvan situation of Greater Ambrose Surlesard were as foolish and meatless as . . ." He allowed his voice to trail off and shrugged, but it was a shrug honed to meaning, and Olivia rightly read that meaning to be as yourself.

She did not want to cry. She had always scorned those young women who reacted to every adversity with tears. To submit to weeping, even if only the random teardrop trickling down her cheek, was to admit that the man had power over her spirit, the power to wound her, the power to make her care more than tuppence for his good opinion of her. So it was the condensation of the fog on her face that accounted for the wetness she felt. It had to be the fog.

Olivia had just wiped away the stubborn condensation for the fourth time when she heard Telemachus utter a loud whoop of distress and the sound of heavy luggage tumbling down a long, narrow, echoing shaft seized her heart with dread.

"Tilly? Tilly, are you all right?" She dropped her own bags and hurried toward the sound:

Strong hands closed on her shoulders and she screamed, more from surprise than fear. "Arrh, there, lass, ye don't be wantin' fer t' foller yon gudeman down Hob's Chimbley, now would'ee?" A gravelly voice boomed in her ear and she smelled hot iron and woodsmoke. She squirmed and fought free, only to have the powerful grip close around her arm and yank her backward.

"Look'ee here, gudewyf, yer man a'n't be scumbled, noo. Them as tummits a-down Hob's way, why there a'n't but t' fetch 'em up a gin, as hale and brawny as when they pitchert in, for all that 'tis where the gudewyfs o' Broseytown been emptyin' their auld feather downies to these many years. Coom'ee, coom wi' me an' bring yer ghostly da the with, so's he'll bear'un witness."

The fog was beginning to thin out. It was a process only a little less rapid than the wholesale assault of the mists, so that by the time Olivia's captor had done speaking, she had a good look at him and her surroundings. To her surprise, she saw that she was held motionless in the grasp of a short, thickly muscled man with skin as swarthy as any gypsy's, made blacker by a layer of soot. His hair was of the same midnight hue, his slitty, slanted eyes an unnerving blue that made Olivia, all irrationally, think of a hungry wolf.

She felt the rising urge to escape, but suppressed it. Why try? She saw how hopeless it would be. Although he did not quite come up to her shoulder, she had

no illusions about who was the more powerful of the two. Everything about him was square and mighty, from his amply corded neck and shoulders to the tips of his blunt, filthy fingers. Winter be damned, he was stripped to the waist and wore no more than a blacksmith's leather apron over what looked like a brown loincloth. His feet were bare and seemed ready to thrust roots into the earth at the first opportunity.

Another yowl from Telemachus tore Olivia's attention away from the little man. Now the fog was gone entirely and she could see that she stood not three paces from the lip of a well whose curb was just a ring of flat rocks such as a housewife might use for stepping stones in her garden. A host of spectral white flecks danced merrily in the air above the pit. Olivia shuddered violently as one landed on her forearm.

"Oh, for pity's sake, Olivia, calm down." Father Herrick plucked the small assailant off her with thumb and forefinger. "It's just a bit of goosedown."

The dwarfish blacksmith nodded vigorously. "Tha ghostly da have th' right o't. As I told 'ee 'twas. Coom th' noo an' we'll have auld Granny Bones t' fetch up yer friend, ere he snorbles in too many feathytickles an' gets took of a sudden with the sneezes." Now that he could see there was no further danger of Olivia tumbling down the wellshaft after Telemachus, his hold on her arm turned from shackle to guide as he steered her to one of the twenty trim cottages set so prettily here and there about the town green.

Granny Bones tamed out to be a plump, personable matron in her early sixties, despite a name that had Olivia figuring wolfbane, spiderwebs, warts and witchery into the lady's curriculum vitae. Like the blacksmith, she was short, stocky, and dark, except for a crown of silver hair and those same disturbingly blue eyes. Rather than standing at the edge of the pit and calling upon long-departed pagan deities to raise Telemachus from the underworld, Granny simply traipsed out to the gardener's shed behind her thatch-roofed cottage, produced a collapsible aluminum ladder, and let it down the well for Telemachus to climb up.

"Used as was we'd but th' rope 'un," she explained for the newcomers' benefit. She spoke the same strange, musical, unassignable dialect as the blacksmith. This singular idiom set Olivia's mind whiffing as she tried to find some kindred example from her many interviews with rural types against which to compare and analyze it. No use, it stood unique. "An' tarred right thick 'twas from when gudeman Praxter did sail wi' t' Royal Navy. Thic oon's much th' better, arr, so 't be."

Telemachus came out of the well covered head to foot in discarded poultry feathers, but no worse for the wear. Granny Bones cupped her plump hands to her mouth and let loose a long, eerie, yodeling cry. Immediately every cottage door but one flew open and the inhabitants of Greater Ambrose Surlesard came pouring onto the town green to greet the visitors.

They had indeed achieved their rural grail of Greater Ambrose Surlesard, of



that  
much the natives informed them right off the bat. "Ye're a fortun'd as ye  
didn't  
go toomblies into th' rivvy," said gudeman Paisley Bloodwell, who ran the  
town's  
public house and in-a-pinch inn. He and his sturdy son Wensley took charge of  
the visitors' baggage at once and had them installed in the two spare bedrooms  
abovestairs before Telemachus got all the feathers plucked out of his hair.

"What, ah, 'rivvy'?" Father Herrick asked, ducking to avoid smashing his  
forehead on one of the inn's low-hanging beams.

"What rivvy, ask 'un? Why, t' Sard, blest be! Else where'd ye think ye was  
then,  
arr? Aye, Greater Ambrose ever be on t' rivvy Sard, from whencit t' proud name  
of 'un, albeit in they Frenchitruffled Normeen talk, so 'tis. An' mighty fine  
trouts a man can tickle out of 'un, too, do he set his mind at."

"Textbook case," said Father Herrick some time later as the three adventurers  
huddled around a plank table in the common room, nursing the local ale.  
"Absolutely a textbook case of isolated primitivism at its finest. The place  
utterly reeks with the hot pulsing of blood spilled before the ever-avid gods  
of  
rampant carnality." He consulted his pocket watch. "We have until Friday."

"I don't think I need to stay here until Friday," Olivia said. She cast the  
latest of a series of nervous looks around the common room. Every man-jack of  
the Greater Ambrosians there present and enjoying the evening pint looked like  
a  
minor genetic variation on Granny Bones, the Bloodwells, and the village  
blacksmith, whose name so happened to be Ham Dethalter. "I would prefer to  
return to London. I -- I still have some holiday shopping to do and--"

"Afraid, Miss Drummond?" Father Herrick's ravenwing brows lifted just a  
trifle.

"No longer the scoffer at poor Stilby-Nash's vanishment that you were?"

Olivia stiffened. "I am not afraid," she said. She lied, she knew it, they all  
knew it, but neither Father Herrick nor Telemachus was tactless enough to call  
her on it. "It's simply that -- well, having come here I see that this village  
shelters a wealth of folkloric subject matter in its nearly pristine state. I  
have had a word with Granny Bones concerning local songs, traditions, and  
beliefs, and it is my considered opinion that this area is almost entirely  
free  
of any urban contagion. As a matter of fact, Granny said that they have never  
had a single citizen of Greater Ambrose leave the village to settle elsewhere,  
and the last person to serve in the armed forces was this Praxter fellow."

"He of the tarred rope ladder?." The vicar tapped his lower lip. "Amazing,  
particularly in light of the robust health our host's son, the amiably bovine  
Wensley Bloodwell, seems to enjoy. Why was he not taken up into the service  
during the late war, I wonder?"

"Oh, Wensley told me that himself," Telemachus put in, sipping his ale  
carefully. "He's too old." Two inquiring looks caught him in the crosshairs,  
causing him to choke a bit on his drink, then say, "Well, he told me he tried  
to  
enlist, but they weren't taking anyone over the age of sixty-five, so he  
turned  
about and came right back ho --"

"Sixty-five." Father Herrick repeated the figure as one who has been told he owes a certain absurd sum to the Inland Revenue and assumes that by simple repetition he will work some domestic magic that will cause the vanishment of debt, debtor, or the Inland Revenue and all who sail in her.

"I know he doesn't look it," Telemachus hastened to add.

"Tilly, that is an understatement on a par with saying that Miss Drummond is plain." The vicar's lip curled.

"Oh, I say!" Telemachus took umbrage, at the which Olivia wondered. "Miss Drummond is not-- she is not-- not one of these over-painted bridge club sorts, but --"

"Plain," Father Herrick repeated suavely. "In the best sense of the word, of course. Wholesome. Like milk. You do like milk, I'm sure?" Telemachus could not but agree and left off his gallant sputterings. "You see, dear boy, you were quite mistaken as to the disparaging intent of my remark concerning Miss Drummond's looks. I submit that you must also have been in error as to the age you heard young Wensley claim, as well as the reason for his rejection from the armed services. Perhaps he told them that he was sixty-five and clung to the tale so zealously that they assumed the lad was daft and sent him packing?"

"Yes, I suppose that's one answer," Telemachus admitted.

"Ah!"

"It's wrong, of course. I saw his baptismal certificate." For the first time Olivia could recall seeing such a prodigy, Telemachus' eyes sparkled with spunk and triumph.

It was now Father Herrick's turn to sputter. He lacked practice and made a poor showing of it. "What trumpery-- ? How gullible can you-- ? Did you never think-- ? Telemachus, does the word/forgery suggest nothing to you?"

"I can tell a genuine baptismal certificate from a false, if that's what you mean, Vicar," Telemachus countered. "My chosen life's-work may not pay much in coin -- Heaven knows, I've quite a comfortable little income to support me -- but it has earned me more than sufficient experience in researching church records. Wensley Bloodwell was born foursquare in the reign of Queen Victoria."

For once in his life, Telemachus Battle-Purfitt spoke with a degree of confidence and force capable of taking the wind from the sails of a whole fleet of Father Herricks. The vicar was blown, good and proper.

"But -- but that makes no sense!" he protested. "Wensley is the youngest person I've yet seen in this godforsaken hamlet, and if he's sixty-five--"

"If I was permitted access to the church records, I have no doubt that you may come along and see them for yourself," Telemachus said.

The church of Greater Ambrose Surlesard was a Romanesque structure so blocky as to make stolid Norman architecture look like the airy stone fantasies of the High Gothic. A light snow was falling as the three visitors trudged across the village green -- carefully skirting Hob's Chimbley -- to seek confirmation of Telemachus' extraordinary discovery.

"The parish records are kept in a locked cabinet in the vestry," Telemachus explained as they entered the musty portal. "There's a kindly old gentleman about the place who showed them to me when I asked. He has the key, of course, although whether he is the sexton, the curate, or the vicar himself, I couldn't say."

"Vicar?" Father Herrick was pleased to be sarcastic. "A vicar to tend to the spiritual wants of this hotbed of ancient agricultural festivity? I am astonished at your innocence, Tilly. The dark, tellurian forces which reign over Greater Ambrose long since must have demanded the sacrifice of any representative of the Established Church."

"Well," said Telemachus, craning his neck to peer into the unlit depths of the building, "maybe he was just the sexton after all."

While he and Father Herrick went hallooing into the shadows, searching for the supposed sexton and his keys, Olivia occupied herself by studying the various plaques, mortuary tablets, and paintings adorning the high windowless walls. It was quite educational, although she could not remember ever having felt so dire a chill creep up her spine as part of any previous learning experience.

For there they were, all over the walls: the lizards. The mural at Staddle-upon-Truss was but a poor cousin to the reptilian richness of these decorations. On the south wall some anonymous artist of pre-Norman stock had limned a grand processional in which flower-crowned maidens wearing smiles and precious little else walked in solemn majesty toward a stone-girt hole in the ground that looked remarkably like Hob's Chimbley. Each damsel carried in her fair white arms a lizard. On the north wall was a kindred processional, this one belonging to a later period in the history of Church art, in which able-bodied yeomen of Agincourt's date marched with longbows or agrarian implements over their shoulders and lizards in their hands.

"Nice, isn't it?" said a voice behind Olivia. She gave a startled chirp and whirled around to face a most ancient gentleman whose lively blue eyes loaned an illusion of youth to his densely wrinkled skin and waist-length white hair and beard. "Although I like the one with the girls better. You can see their bubbles without straining your eyes too much. Nice, white, round little dumplings as they got, 'twere a pity could no one see 'em." His eyes fell deliberately to Olivia's own tweed-shrouded chest, causing her all unnecessarily to cross her arms over her veiled assets.

"Are you -- are you the sexton?" she stammered.

"No," the old gentleman replied. "I'm the wizard." He extended his right hand in

jovial good-fellowship. "Merlinus Ambrosius, master of the black arts at your service, marm. And whom do I have the pleasure of -- ?"

"Father Herrick!" Hate it how she might, Olivia could not prevent her voice from skirling up in that silly school gift way. "Oh, Father Herrick, Tilly, come quickly!"

Feet came pounding swiftly from the rear of the church as Telemachus and Father Herrick responded to Olivia's panic-stricken cries. "What--what -- what is it?" the vicar panted, leaning against a fat, painted pillar wreathed with a salamander motif.

Before Olivia could say a word, Telemachus stepped forward, smiling brightly. "Ah, this is a bit of good luck! I see you've found him." He shook the old man vigorously by the hand.

It was later, while Father Herrick pored over the freed church records under the benevolent eye of their elderly keeper, that Olivia nudged Telemachus and whispered, "Did you know he's a loony?"

"What? That sweet old geezer?" Telemachus glanced at the old man with a soft eye a brim with Dickensian sentimentality. "A trifle enthusiastic, perhaps, but I shouldn't wonder over that too much. I'll wager he gets precious few opportunities to show off the documents in his care, except as the necessity of some lawsuit or other might demand." He sighed. "Poor chap, how lonely he must be. He told me he has neither kith nor kin living."

"He told me he was Merlin," Olivia stated.

"Well, what's in a name?" Telemachus shrugged.

"Not merely the shadow of Arthur's wizard, Tilly, but the substance; that's his claim." Olivia made a face. "Bonkers. Clean bonkers. I hope he's not violent, that's all."

Father Herrick appeared to have grown more than courteously companionable with the aforesaid loony. The two heads, dark and silver, bowed over the church records, bobbing now in earnest, scholarly discussion, now in cordial mirth. At one point Olivia saw Father Herrick deliberately slue his eyes in her direction, lift his brows, and wink at the old man who grinned and whispered something in the vicar's ear. She could not know for certain of what Father Herrick spoke, but she could make a fairly accurate guess. Both men roared with laughter as the hot blood of mortification flooded her face.

"Olivia?" A baffled Telemachus called out after her as she stiff-armed him aside and dashed out of the church. She paid him no mind. Just as a single extra straw may cause a laden camel no end of inconvenience, this last sniper's shot from the rejected vicar had been one more than poor, put-upon Olivia could bear.

Despite her best efforts, the stiffness of her upper lip was dissolving in the badly pent-up floods of tears trembling in her eyes. Her vision blurred, nor was it helped by the fact that the snowfall outside had gone from gentle flakes to briskly whipping blast. All was whirling whiteness to her sight as she dashed across the green.

All went from white to black, without ceremony, as she tripped upon a bit of stone and tumbled down Hob's Chimbley.

Olivia woke some time later-- precisely how much later she could not gauge -- to the distant sound of voices raised in argument. She opened her eyes slowly, gloved hands going over her throbbing head until they found the spot around back where she had knocked herself silly against the masonry walls. If there was no further damage done, it was thanks to the billows of discarded goosedown lining the pit. She plucked a pinch of the stuff and idly blew the feathers up toward the surface world.

"Olivia? Olivia, are you all right?" Telemachus' anxious voice reached her. She looked up but could not see his face, merely the familiar shape of his head overhanging the abyss, stark black against the backdrop of the falling snow.

"I'm fine, Tilly," she called.

"Of course she's fine!" Father Herrick's testy words nipped her like the teeth of frost. "With all that cushioning down there, it would take a real idiot to do himself any serious harm."

"Arr, well, an' don't this fall out betimelies."

Telemachus' head was jerked away from the brink of Hob's Chimbley to be replaced by the apple-cheeked countenance of Granny Bones. Olivia thought it odd that she could see the old woman's features so clearly under optic circumstances that allowed her to perceive Telemachus only in silhouette. Still, there it was.

"My dear woman, must you look so pleased?" High above Olivia's head, Telemachus' querulous voice rang out. "I have asked you repeatedly to fetch the ladder. You have as repeatedly ignored me. I thought it might have been your purpose first to see whether Miss Drummond would prove capable of ascending independently, upon her return to consciousness." His head reappeared over the edge as he caroled down, "You do think you can climb out by yourself, don't you, Olivia?"

She got to her feet by degrees, establishing a shaky footing on the feathery floor before cupping hands to mouth and shouting back up at him, "Yes, I'm sure I can, if someone will just fetch me that blessed ladder!"

"There! You see?" Telemachus stood justified.

"We do be seein'," Granny Bones replied in the very tone so venerable a lady might use toward a favored though forward grandchild. "Fit as a pippin she be,

an' that's all to the good, fer what awaits the lass."

"What do you mean?" The quaver was back in Telemachus' words, shaking them badly. "What are you talking about? What awaits her?"

"Why, t' ancient rite, o' course, so I be meanin'. Here it be, full upon us, an' t' moon in her proper phase for 'un, an' wicked bad powers runnin' strong thro' t' earth a gin our sacred shapin's o' t' forces what be. Na, ha, sirrah, don't be gawperin' at me so. 'Tis nowt as'll harm t' lass, an' much good we'll glean from her the bye."

Olivia closed her eyes. Above, the argument had rejoined, but she paid no mind to the individual words thereof. Let Telemachus yip and squeal his outrage, let Father Herrick cluck his tongue and say he'd told them so, none of that signified. She knew she was doomed. Friday would be her last upon this earth.

Friday, and the Yuletide.

The ancient rite.

Evil powers running through the earth, oh yes, she knew what it all meant for her!

She was to be the sacrifice, the primitive guarantee of fertility. At that dread time of year when the simple country folk of oldentimes saw only death in the frozen furrow and the very sun seemed to be dying, something must be done to revive the heavens and the earth. Her blood would fructify the land before you could say chthonic.

And what will they do with poor Tilly? she wondered. Father Herrick's grown thick as thieves with the local zany, the old coot who calls himself Merlin, so he 'll be a able to slither his way out of this at avistic nightmare. He 'll convince these rustics that their gory little secret's safe with him, but Tilly -- Tilly's too honest to play the cozener. She sighed. Maybe they'll keep him around for the summer solstice frolics and toss him in a bog somewhere. Poor, poor Tilly. He once told me that marshwater gives him the ague fearfully bad.

Once more she cupped her hands to mouth and shouted up, "Listen, I know what you're up to! Well, go ahead and do your worst. Only let my friends go free. They shan't tell a soul about any of this."

Father Herrick's sneer echoed nicely down Hob's Chimbley. "No, we'll just wander back to civilization -- two ordinary men who were last seen in the company of a single woman -- and no one will question why we've come back without you at all." A cynical snicker came tumbling after. "Sorry, Olivia, old girl, but your virginity isn't half so precious to these people as maintaining an uncomplicated life is to me."

"Ohhhh, virgin she be?" Granny Bones leaned further over the pit so that her bosom hung down like a rain-heavy cloud. "Even better fer us, aye." A hearty

chorus of assent came from several throats whose owners remained beyond Olivia's limited ken.

"I thought virginity of the sacrificial victim was a must in these rituals." Father Herrick sounded irked.

"Na, na, not a bit o' it. All that's wanted fer 'un is that whatever goes betoomblies a down Hob's Chimbley play t' chosen part. 'Thout ye folk'd done so, 'twould've fallen out so's we'd needs must push one o' our own number adown 'un. The which we be more'n a bitsy unwilling t' do, aye."

Telemachus spoke out then, strong and true. "If that's so, then take me and let Miss Drummond go!"

Granny Bones leaned one sweatered elbow on the lip of the shaft. "Tak' 'ee?" She didn't seem surprised by the offer, merely interested.

"Yes, me." Telemachus' voice quavered only a bit as he reiterated his gallant offer. "I was the first to fall down Hob's Chimbley, after all. It's-- it's my right!"

"Oh, arr, so't be, only-- Weeel, usual t' rite calls fer a female. Seein' as how t' lass be a virgin pure in t' bargain an' all, I'm afeared she's got ye beat on points."

There was a silence that hovered in the frosty air for as long as it takes a young man to swallow hard, grit his teeth, and weigh in his heart the things that really matter.

"So am I."

Olivia thought she would never hear such a roistering to-do as broke out among the populace of Greater Ambrose then. The ladder was fetched posthaste and slung down the shaft without further let or hindrance. As she climbed out of her downy cell, Olivia blinked her eyes against the surface light like a lantern-struck barn owl. The only soul left to greet her was Father Herrick. The massed villagers were already some distance away, and getting farther by the moment. She could just make out poor Tilly's skinny limbs splaying this way and that as he was borne off upon-the shoulders of the crowd.

She spared herself just long enough to brush off the clinging feathers before seizing Father Herrick by the jacket lapels and shouting in his face, "We must run for help at once! They'll kill him!"

The vicar glanced at her with dreamy eyes. "Mmm. Must we? I mean, do you think we'd ever reach civilization in time to do the luckless blighter any good? Friday's only a day off, and they're likely to perform the rite at sunup, so we've scarcely a bit more than twenty-four hours."

"You'd just stand by and permit this -- this pagan outrage?" Another minute

and

Olivia knew she would be blithering with fury.

"Well, I don't see as how there's much we can do about it. Even did we manage to find our way to Earl's Benefice in this snow--" He looked skyward to where the falling flakes had reached a consensus and resolved to become a minor blizzard without further delay" -- could we be certain of finding our way back again? We arrived in a fog, remember. Not the best circumstances for recognizing helpful landmarks."

"You -- you -- !" Despite herself, there she was, flying into a dudgeon in a manner she had always scorned when she viewed the same in the performances of minor West End actresses. "You think you're safe, that's why you won't do anything to help Tilly! Or me, if it had come to that! You just want to be here when they perform their ghastly ritual so that when it's all over you can go home, snug as you please, and write it all up to the greater glory of Father John Herrick!"

"Baronet," the vicar added, that faraway look in his eyes once more. "Esquire. A knighthood, perhaps. Major scholarship of thi water might not be without its more palpable rewards, don't you think, Olivia.?"

"Oooohhhhhh, you -- you --" She puffed up like a teakettle until, simultaneously fed up with his cold ambition and her own overheated impotence, she shouted, "You toad!" and pushed him hard in the chest with both hands.

"Aaiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeee!" said Father Herrick as, being a good toad, he plummeted straight down the hole of Hob's Chimbley. There came a feather \*plouf?\* when he made impact, then not a sound save the falling snow and gusting wind.

Olivia looked in all directions, at a loss for what to do first. The ladder in Hob's Chimbley was still in place, but she assumed that the vicar was too stunned to use it, at least for the time being. A practical woman, she knew she was not strong enough to carry him up, even were she so inclined. As indeed she was not. A vindictive woman, she removed the ladder. It might benefit the vicar's soul and outlook in general if, on waking he were to have the leisure to contemplate his selfish ways in the relative tranquility of the shaft.

A decision was made: she would go after the villagers and by Harry, she would make them let Tilly go or she'd give them blood for their furrows in spades!

Although the mob had vanished from her ken, their prints were still plain to see in the snow. These, however, were filling fast. She spared only a few instants to dash into the abandoned blacksmith shop to obtain some manner of weapon. She cast about in vain. Ham Dethalter might not lock up his shop, but he did tidy away most of his tools in chests and cabinets that wanted a key to be opened. Olivia tried to raise the big sledgehammer, failed, and settled for a pair of badly bent fireplace tongs which some customer or other had left to be bashed straight again.



Outside, she sniffed the rising wind like a hound. Night's blackness was seeping swiftly over all. The footprints of the crowd had faded to ghosts, but she was still able to follow them in the fading light until a distant hubbub of music and voices caught her ear and brought her the rest of the way home.

The brouhaha was coming from a large white house which lay a goodly distance from the village green. It huddled in a small, bowl-shaped dell through which ran a modest stream, black against the snow and still clear of ice despite the weather. One old oak stood before the door, a curious exception to the evergreens which bushed up all around the property like dowagers in fatty furs.

The windows on the ground floor were all brightly alight and the sound of awful revelry reached her unhindered by any muffling draperies. Her ungloved hand grasping the tongs was freezing. Her other hand, crammed deeply into the pocket of her coat, fared little better as she edged up to the nearest sill and steeled herself for whatever grim display she might presently see.

"-- so I tells him, 'Ooooooh, Mr. Dickens, ain't yet' saucy rogue?' And what's t' naughty bugger do but goose me wi' his missus not a stone's throw away, haggling wi' auld Ham over t' price o' soom gilt andirons!"

Granny Bones clinked her frothing mug of ale against the blacksmith's and drained it, then urged Telemachus to do the same with his.

Poor Tilly was sandwiched between the two village worthies, pale as a slice of cheese between hunks of good brown bread. One hand clutched a brimming mug of ale, the other held onto his knobbly knees for dear life. "I -- I doubt I ought," he replied, setting the mug aside and using both hands to safeguard his knees from any prowling joint-bandits.

A chorus of objections came from the merry villagers filling the garland-hung room. Jolly faces beamed at the guest of honor where he sat in splendor on a huge plush armchair before the roaring fire. Granny Bones and the blacksmith perched on the plum-colored armrests like a pair of upholstery gargoyles.

Against one wall Olivia could see a groening board of gargantuan proportions, laden with all manner of succulent seasonal delicacies --roast goose, mince pies, syllabub, a holly-crowned boar's head, partridges roasted and regarbed in the gaudy plumage they had worn in life, a brimming punchbowl where whitecaps of "lambswool" bobbed alongside wizened crabapples.

The ancient noddy who called himself Merlin was manning the ladle. "Drink up, drink up!" he insisted. "We're all friends here. Nothing like a good stoup of ale to welcome in the festive season. Unless you'd fancy a measure of this?" He doled out a cupful of punch and offered it to Telemachus.

"No, no, really, I couldn't." Tilly's hand was shaking as he waved off the oldman's hospitality. "Besides, I-- I should think you'd prefer me to keep my

wits about me. If I should stumble in the procession tomorrow, it might disturb the holiness of the occasion, ruin the sacrifice, and so forth."

Tomorrow! The word slammed Olivia's heart. But tomorrow was only Thursday. Her womanly self exclaimed, Oh, poor Tilly! Her scholarly side huffed, They are supposed to hold the Yuletide sacrifice on Friday! Haven't these stupid pagans read the right books?

"Blest be t' heart o' 'un." Granny Bones chuckled warmly. "Heaven love 'ee, child, nowt ye could do as'd harm our solemnities. They a'n't too picky over what we offers 'em. Not like soom." Her sparkling eyes dimmed. A look of gravest concern momentarily froze her features. She made a strange, unchristian sign over herself-- a slithery passage of the hand from shoulder to shoulder-- which was aped by every villager there present.

"I take it-- I take that they are your gods?" Telemachus asked. But before he could obtain an answer, there came a harsh crash at the door, then another, then a third which splintered the portal at the lockplate and spent it swinging wide open to the wintry blast.

"Don't worry, Tilly!" Olivia cried, brandishing the tongs. "I'll save you!"

"Oh, for -- !" The old man by the punchbowl made a face. "Young woman, in decent society we are taught to knock." He raised the ladle and wigwagged it in the air. Olivia was swept from her feet on what looked like a sparkling cloud of pastel fireflies and plunked down on a chair which sprang up like a mushroom from the floor right beside Tilly's seat. When she attempted to rise from her place, still swinging the tongs wildly, her weapon of choice transformed itself into an infant ferret which ducked into her sleeve. Much shrill squealing and a couple of minutes' worth of amateur Irish jigging later, she managed to evict it. Paisley Bloodwell lured it off with a pheasant leg and peace returned.

Olivia hid her face in her hands and sobbed.

"Miss Drum-- Olivia." Warm hands closed over her shaking shoulders. "Please don't carry on so. I shan't have a minute's peace going to my death if you won't stop crying over me."

The general level of jollity pervading the gathering vanished like a drop of oil in the Atlantic. "Death?" Bloodwell the tapster repeated. "Here, now! Ye told auld Granny as ye was in t' pink. Ye han't bin aholdin' back anything now has 'ee?"

"Arr," Ham Dethalter concurred. "Gin ye're summa, betooken wi' t' rheumatics, 'twould be wicked evil doin's at t' ritchul, an' no mistake."

Almost without thinking, Olivia found herself melting into Telemachus' arms. From this haven she raised her head and bitterly confronted the villagers. "How kind of you to insist that your human sacrifices die in good health."

"Wot?"

"Human?"

"Sackereefices?"

The silver-headed gaffer self-yclept Merlin rolled his eyes. "Not again!" he exclaimed, plainly at the tether's end. "Oh, he'll laugh himself silly, if he wasn't such a vicious bastard." Eyes boring gimlet holes into Olivia and Telemachus he spat, "Bloody folklorical fools."

Telemachus looked entirely bewildered, but his protective embrace around Olivia's shoulders did not falter. "Eh?" he inquired. "Then am I-- am I to understand that the rite for which you require my person tomorrow does not also require my life?"

"You might say that," Merlin replied dryly. "If you weren't such a book-bound idiot."

"Oh, I say!" Telemachus took umbrage.

"If I'd've had it my way," the codger continued, "I'd've tossed the two of you down Hob's Chimbley and left you there for a Yuletide gift, but what can I do?"

His expansive gesture took in the whole room and the villagers therein. "My hands are tied. I'm only here on sufferance, and even in my day it wasn't the done thing to insult the prejudices of one's host. Bread and salt and all that claptrap."

"'Twere a Bloodwell as found 'im," said the innkeeper of the same family name, cocking a calloused thumb at the old man. "Aye, just amucklin' through t' woods, old Orsli Bloodwell were, when he spies this fine old oak an' thinks to hisself, he do, what a prime log un'd make for t' cruel winter wot was comin'."

"I was lucky he didn't chop my ankles off when he felled my tree." Clearly Merlin did not share the innkeeper's worshipful pride in the Bloodwell family's great historical accomplishment. "But he did not, so there you are. There I was, rather. One look and the good fellow bundled me straightaway home with him to this sweet place. Oh, it was a fine change from the hustle-bustle of Camelot, with all its intrigue and treachery and illicit bed warming and Esus knows what-all, I can tell you! I half believe I allowed that sluttish chit of a Nimue-person to imprison me with my own magic just so I could get a few hours of peace and quiet."

"A few hours?" Olivia was incredulous. "But if what you say is so, it was more like a few centuries."

Merlin made a wry face. "Madam, you exaggerate, although not by much. The trouble was, the little strumpet took to magic like a salamander to the flames.

Oh she did a bang-up job on me, all right, in more ways than one. I was quite glad of some human companionship by the time Paisley's great-grandfather broke me out. You can't get any intelligent conversation out of beetles, you know,

unless it's about politics. And even then, there were so many of those damned Saxon kings mollocking up the landscape the year I emerged that I did not want to talk about them."

"Surely you can't mean his great-grandfather," Olivia asserted. "Not in the same breath as Saxon kings."

"Oh, can't I," Merlin countered. "I bloody well can. All of them called Egbert or Egdred or Egontoast or suchlike daft names, ugh! I tell you, I positively leaped with joy when the Normans showed up. At least none of their kings sounded like what you get out of a hen's bum."

"This is madness," Olivia breathed, burrowing even deeper into Telemachus' arms.

"Madness!" She raised her head and shouted at the room, "You can not possibly have only four generations between yourselves and the Saxon kings, you can not claim that your youngest fellow was born in the reign of Queen Victoria, and you can not by any stretch of the imagination expect us to believe that you are the true and original wizard Merlin from King Arthur's time! You are all either insane or the greatest nest of liars I've ever met outside of London!"

A damp and foggy pall of silence fell over the once-merry gathering. The assembled villagers exchanged solemn glances, then one by one filed out of the house and into the night leaving Merlin alone with Tilly and Olivia. The old man looked extremely put out.

"Now you've done it," he said brusquely.

"Where -- where have they gone?" Telemachus inquired

"Somewhere they won't be insulted, I fancy. But rerum they shall, make no mistake! They'll be back when it's time to prepare you for the ritual. Only the punch will be cold by then and quite spoiled. Never you mind all the trouble I went to in mixing it up on such short notice, oh no!"

"Couldn't you just, ah--" Telemachus wiggled a finger at the punchbowl the way Merlin had wiggled the ladle" -- heat it up that way?"

The old man snorted. "Shows all you know! Magic and alcohol don't mix. Hmph! The more I see of what this world's become, the happier I am to remain in this blessed backwater. Courtesy's dead."

"And so shall we be, soon enough!" Olivia cried out in despair.

"Dead? You?" Merlin's scorn was palpable. "Not at the rate you're going. Virgins last forever. It's having brats that ages a person and drags him down into the grave before his time. To say nothing of what a drain children are upon a community's resources. Never a village big enough to hold all of 'em, and before you know where you are they're agitating to spread their wings and take off for the city. Well! Between the ones that stay home and suck a hamlet dry and the

ones that run off and leave their poor parents feeling like a pile of moldy antiques, children have done for more pretty little rural spots in Britain than the Black Death." He crossed his arms. "The less the breeding, the longer you live."

Before Olivia or Telemachus could question him, the old man waved the punchbowl ladle at them again and they found themselves blown from their chairs into a small room just off the parlor. The door slammed and they heard a heavy wooden bar fall across it from the outside. Olivia flung herself against the portal, pounding it with her fists until Telemachus stayed her with a much of his hand.

"It's no use," he said, and she knew he was right. She began to cry in earnest.

"Oh, stop that!" Merlin's voice came from the far side of the door. "I only put you in there to keep you safe until the others return. I've got some housework to do and I don't want you running off. Not in this weather. You'd do yourselves more of a mischief than we ever would. Why, you might even fall down that stupid hole again. I don't see why they don't just fill it in, it's a menace to public safety. But the last time I suggested it, Granny Bones said that he wouldn't like it, and when he doesn't like a thing, he makes sure everyone knows about it."

Telemachus pressed his cheek to the door and asked, "He being-- ?" But Merlin was already bustling about his household chores.

In time, Olivia's tears dwindled down to a pair of raspy sobs and a final hiccup. Telemachus offered her his pocket handkerchief. She dried her eyes and examined their cell, in the vague, romantic hopes of finding some avenue of liberation. Most of her childhood literature had consisted of adventures in which the imprisoned heroine never failed to be rescued or to save herself by the simple device of discovering a means of escape. Said means always remained stubbornly anonymous until such time as the heroine's situation reached the proper level of desperation. Then and only then did a trick of the light reveal the hinges of the secret passageway, or a sudden shift in the dust of centuries disclose an unguessed trapdoor.

Alas, whoever had designed Merlin's cottage had not read the proper literature. There was a window, but it was too high up and too narrow to allow escape. It did give a rather nice view of the moonlit snow, however.

"It is lovely, is it not?" Telemachus' words were a thrilling warmth in her ear. "Strange how we see beauty best only when we know it will soon be taken from us. Moonlight and snow, so pale, so lovely." She felt his hands on her shoulders, and an answering pressure roundabout her heart. She could not speak -- she dared not. The air was thick with silvery spells. She tasted them with every in drawn

breath.

His hands shifted slightly, making her turn toward him. She saw the snow-dappled shadows fall in lacy veils across his face. Whose smoldering, tender, demanding eyes were those behind his spectacles? Surely not good old Tilly's! Tilly. .no, no, not Tilly. She would not dare use such a silly name to speak of this -- this -- (did she dare to dream him so?) this man.

"Lovely," he repeated, and then his lips fell hungrily over her own, his arms crashing her. She found to her surprise and delight that she quite enjoyed being thus crushed. She even tried to crash back, a bit.

And one thing led to another until there were no clothes and very little propriety left.

"Oh dear," said Telemachus afterward. "I'm afraid we're in for it now." But his satisfied smile belied the timidity of his words entirely.

Olivia giggled. "Well, that's one way to spoil a virgin sacrifice." She settled her arms comfortably around his neck and said, "Let's make double certain it's mined."

They were at the initial stages of this worthy project when the door opened and Merlin stood silhouetted by the light, his skinny body framed by a backdrop of curious villagers. He started to say, "Come along now; it's time." He ended by saying, "Come a -- Oh, bugger!"

"Don't look, son!" the innkeeper cried, clapping a hand across Wensley's goggling eyes. "Ye're too young fer such."

Olivia grabbed for her scattered clothing while Telemachus crouched before her in his best attempt at a protective posture. Merlin took one look at the skinny young man's snarling lips and flashing eyes, remarked, "Silly git," and gestured. Both lovers found themselves immediately clothed, lacking only their overcoats.

"It's a marvel!" Olivia gasped, staring down at herself.

"Not such a big one," Telemachus replied, fidgeting. "The old coot's got my small clothes on backward."

"It won't make any difference where you're going" Merlin said, his voice colder than the winter weather outside. "Let's be off. It's nearly dawn."

The villagers stayed only long enough to pass two bulky bundles of folded cloth to the wizard, who in turn bestowed them on Olivia and Telemachus. While the bemused pair shook these out, all the villagers dashed away again. The doth bundles turned out to be thick wool cloaks, heavily embroidered with intricate patterns of fantastic beasts. The new-made lovers exchanged a scientist's glance

of recognition: These were the very creatures from the fatal church mural that had brought them here.

"Lizards," Telemachus whispered.

"Lizards," Olivia repeated. "But . . . why?"

"Perhaps they're not lizards. Perhaps they're really dragons." Telemachus shuddered. "Anything is possible in this uncanny place."

Olivia gave her qualified agreement: "Smallish dragons. I think if we're thrown to any such, we might have a good chance of holding them off . . . for a time . . . if there aren't too many of them."

"Oh, hush before you spout worse rubbish." Merlin prodded her in the small of the back with his twiggy finger. "Put the cloaks on and move along. It's almost past time to begin."

They walked where they were taken, out of Merlin's cottage, out of the dell, and back into the center of Greater Ambrose. They set foot upon the village green just in time to see Ham Dethalter helping Father Herrick over the lip of the shaft. The vicar glowered at Olivia, but she was too downcast in her mind to return the hostile grimace. Apart from that, the area was deserted.

"Now what was that fool doing down there?" Merlin muttered. "Playing it close, he was! A mercy he was got out in time."

"Time to throw us in," Olivia said softly.

Telemachus squeezed her hand by way of comfort. "If we must die, let us die together, my darling."

"I'm going to be ill," the wizard announced. "You city noodles haven't the sense God gave hedgehogs. How often must I say it? If a country can produce over thirty-five different kinds of cheese, why can't it also have more than one way to run a ritual? We are not throwing perfectly useful human beings down Hob's Chimbley! Not now, not ever -- well, not on purpose, anyhow -- and not today, of all days!"

"You have -- you have some other place you perform the sacrifice?" Telemachus inquired, the amateur scholar to the bitter end.

An unpleasant glimmer lit the wizard's eyes. "Why, yes, of course we do," he said in a frightfully insinuating tone. "It's like -- it's like whatd'you callums, Christmas waits. Aye, that's it: The waits who go caroling house to house in the village, so quaint and melodious and all that. Only in this case -- stop me if you've heard this one before-- in this case the carolers take you from house to house, and after the householder stands them a treat for their songs, the waits chop off a little bit of one of you -- a finger, a toe, a nose, whatever they fancy -- and give it to their host by way of thanks. That's how they do it, 'round and 'round the village until they run out of bits and

pieces

or they run out of carols, whichever comes first. Then it's everyone off to the winter fields to plant the pieces and ensure the fertility of the land and--"

"You're making that up," said Olivia.

"And what if I am? You're the one who's so set on being a human sacrifice. I'm only trying to please your prejudices. You wouldn't accept the truth if it bit you on the bum."

"Truth biting me on the fundamentals would at least seem more believable than your cock-and-bull tale of bloodthirsty carolers."

"So my tale's unbelievable, eh? Well, my fine lady, then how do you explain that?" Merlin pointed dramatically.

Telemachus squinted. "I don't see anything."

"Of course you don't see anything, you lackwit, they're too far off and the houses are still in the way, but there's no way I can make a grand, wizardly gesture that tells you you're supposed to listen for something, eh?"

Olivia saw nothing, but she heard. Oh, how she heard! It was the unmistakable sound of many voices raised in song. Through the clean, crisp, fir-scented dawn the carol came, its cadence slow, majestic, but exultant, the words as yet too faint to be made out.

They came in twos and threes, all the villagers of Greater Ambrose (except Ham, who was fishing the aluminum ladder out of Hob's Chimbley now that Father Herrick had been dredged to safety). The watery winter sun cast their shadows weakly before them. They marched down one of the narrow hamlet streets, wearing stiff woolen robes dyed berry-red or evergreen, the thickly decorated hems acting like miniature plows to cast the snow away to both sides of the procession. Their gold-embroidered sleeves trailed almost to the ground.

Granny Bones led the way, marking the beat with the clack-clack-clacking jaws of a tiny skull. Olivia gasped.

"For pity's sake, girl, that's only Rollo's headbone!" Merlin snapped.

"Oh, poor Rollo!" Olivia was transfixed with horror.

"Stuff! Rollo died at the ripe old age of seventeen."

"So young?" She trembled, on the brink of a faint.

"Young?" Merlin scoffed. "Why, for a Pekingese that's ancient! Always loved the Yuletide ritual, did Rollo. Run up and down the length of the procession giving that snuffly little bark of his. Still, you'd think old Granny'd leave the poor beast to rest in peace."

By now the procession was on the village green proper and Olivia could see



that

it was indeed a dog's skull that Granny carried. Behind her came two village men, each carrying something small and white in their cupped hands. ("Soap, you ninny!" Merlin growled in her ear. "All it is is soap, so don't go taking another one of your cat fits.") They were followed by two more men -- Paisley and Wensley Bloodwell -- bearing silver basins full of water. They had towels draped over their arms and were the twins of the next two men in line, and the next.

In all, a round dozen male citizens of Greater Ambrose Suflesard marched onto the green, all equipped as if for Maundy Thursday and the washing of some poor beggarfolks' feet. By now the words of the song on their lips was quite audible.

Audible, Olivia soon realized, was no substitute for credible.

"Bring forth your lizards, put them in a tub.

"Bring forth your lizards, rub-a-dub-a-dub.

"Jesus was born this day in Bethlehem.

"Don't tell your lizards; it means nowt to them."

"Lizards?" Olivia echoed. "Lizards?"

Merlin leaned his bearded chin over her shoulder and whispered, "Now you see, your snake's quite the fertility symbol, going about all the time with his whole body spang against the teeming bosom of the Earth Mother and all that."

"You needn't tell me," Olivia hissed, gone a bit reptilian herself under stress.

"I am quite aware of the ancient beliefs. Many early civilizations worshipped the snake as a guarantee of --"

"Oh, aye, fertility's fine when you need more people. But what if you've got enough folks about to be getting on with? What then, eh? Use a snake and you only get more of the same. But your lizard -- ! Up on its little legs, scurrying about while keeping the teeming bosom of the Earth Mother at arm's length, as it were. Ho, ho! It didn't take a genius to figure out that snakes bring fertility, but the feller who tipped to using lizards to prevent fertility from mucking up a person's life, he was a roddy Einstein!"

Now the second part of the procession approached, the women of the village. For

the three visitors it was like seeing the church murals come to life. Every female -- maiden, mother, and crone -- carried an armful of squirming, tail-twitching, scaly. backed lizard. The lizards themselves were far bigger than any breed Olivia had ever surprised in the garden, most being a half yard or more long. The cold of the December dawn did not seem to render them sluggish. Their scales shone with the radiance of fire opals and the grand, fringy crests that ran from the tops of their heads to the tips of their tails erupted into a blaze of gold whenever the sunlight struck them. Smoke rose from

the beasts' nostrils as the women sang the second verse of the eerie song:

"Bring forth your lizards, wash them well with soap.

"Bring forth your lizards, thy salvation's hope.

"Jesus was born and in a manger lay.

"Don't tell your lizards; it means nowt to they."

Ham Dethalter left Father Herrick at the edge of Hob's Chimbley and scuttled off. Granny Bones poked the vicar's arm, said, "Here, hold this," thrust Rollo's skull into his hands, and hustled off after Ham. In less time than it takes to tell, the blacksmith and the beldame had set up a long board-and-sawhorse trestle, covering it with a white cloth. The men put down their basins, towels, and cakes of soap, the women put down their lizards, and still singing their anthem, proceeded to suit the action to the word.

"Washing lizards." Olivia was sure that either the world had gone mad or she had. "They are washing lizards."

"And what else should they be doing while they sing the Ancient Sussex Lizard-Washing Carol? A bloody Morris dance?" Merlin sighed fondly. "Darling, ain't they? The lizards, I mean. You've not seen their like before, I'll wager.

Raised by hand from a clutch of eggs old Paisley's great-great-grandfather Cuchuli found beside Hob's Chimbley one fine morning."

Olivia gaped, speechless, but Telemachus suffered no such infirmity. "I say, Olivia, this is ideal, simply textbook perfect! My God, the symbolism. The lizard as anti-snake, a messenger to the gods requesting less fertility, please, thank you very much all the same! The ceremonial washing to remove all taint of possible conception and childbirth --"

"Don't you like children? Olivia asked in a very small voice.

"I? Oh, I'm mad for them, myself. But this rite is about just the opposite. What a perfect solution to the problems of rural overpopulation. And judging by the evidence of our own eyes, it works!"

Merlin motioned for Father Herrick to join them. "Since you fell down Hob's Chimbley too, I think you ought to take part in the last phase of this ritual along with your friends."

"What?" The vicar dropped Rollo's skull. "But you require virgins to --"  
Olivia and Telemachus exchanged a knowing look whose implications were not lost on Father Herrick. "My God, it is the season of miracles," the clergyman breathed.

Turning to Merlin he added coldly, "Very well. What must I do?"

"Hold still," the wizard replied, and gave a come-hither sign to the village ladies.

Olivia found herself beset by lizards. The women draped her, neck to toes, in

freshly laundered reptiles. Still singing the Ancient Sussex Lizard-Washing Carol, the ladies went about artistically disposing their scaly charges. Too bemused to protest, Olivia glanced about and saw that Telemachus, too, now resembled a most bizarrely decked Christmas tree. He caught her eye and shrugged as if to say, When in Greater Ambrose Surlesard . . .

"It is ever so folkloric," he murmured.

Father Herrick was possessed of no such laissez aller attitude. As the first of the village matrons approached him, reptile to the ready, he drew himself up stiffly, remarked, "I think not," and turned his back upon the solemn ritual. Merlin clicked his tongue in marked disapproval, but said nothing.

Olivia yearned to know how long she would be required to wear her Flying garlands. The beasts' claws were only gentle pinpricks when felt through her ceremonial robe, but although it was no ordeal, neither was it a sensation she wished to prolong indefinitely. Unfortunately, her respect for local custom prevented her from saying a word, lest silence be requisite at this point in the rite. She breathed ever so much easier when -- soon, if not soon enough for her --the women removed the lizards.

"Arr. Weel, that's done," said Granny Bones with satisfaction. "All t' narsty children-bearin' powers has been taken off'un by t' blest lizards an' has now been put 'pon ye two. And dear'tis ye've been t' be our help." She pinched Telemachus' waxy cheek until it colored.

"Do you mean we've caught your spare fertility?" Olivia asked.

Granny Bones only laughed and patted Olivia's stomach. The younger woman cast her eyes hastily downward to hide her blushes. Not so hastily, though, as to miss the look of proprietary joy on Telemachus' face as he gazed at her.

"That's quite all right," he said. "Miss Drummond and I both adore children."

"Aye? Best hurry the banns, then." Granny Bones underlined her counsel with a sly wink.

"Am I to assume that you -- you have no further need of our services?" Olivia asked.

"Bless t' lass! Nay, 'tis ye'll be ravin' some service o' we, by way o' thanks."

The crone clapped her hands and Paisley Bloodwell hauled a small wooden chest from beneath the lizard-washing table.

"See aught ye fancy?" the innkeeper asked as he tilted back the lid. Heaps of jewels and gold bedazzled the eye, stole breath from the body. The chest contained the ransom of one king, three dukes, and a baronet. "By way o' souvenir, like, t' help ye remember we wi' some fondness in latter days."

"Oh," Oliviabreathed, lifting a gemmed dagger with gold wolf's head hilt from the trove.

"Ahhhh," Telemachus likewise exhaled, extricating a weighty gold torque from the tangle of riches still reposing in the chest.

"Good Lord!" Father Herrick exclaimed, plunging both hands into the wallow of exquisite treasures. And also, "Ouch!" when Paisley Bloodwell slapped his wrists smartly and shut the chest with a snap.

"Them's things as belonged t' our old folks hereabouts, onc't on a time. Trinkets an' gew-gaws wot's been handled down through t' countless generations o' Greater Ambrose. Well, t' four or five generations, any road, but still. Them's favors but fer those as helped us celebrate this day," the innkeeper said, severe as any headmaster.

"Helped?" The vicar snorted. "Well, why didn't you say so? I'll help you."

"Too late," said Granny Bones. "We be done with t' lizards." And as if to give credence to her words, the lizards now squirmed free of the women's grasp and trundled themselves briskly to the lip of Hob's Chimbley. By ones and twos they peered into the depths and hurled themselves in.

"Oh, the poor things!" Olivia cried.

"Let 'em go," said Merlin. "It's all a part of the rite, lass. What's Yule without a visit to them as is our closest blood ki --?"

"I'll save them!" Father Herrick shouted, drowning out Merlin's words as he bounded after the apparently suicidal reptiles.

"Here, you daft coot, don't do that!" The wizard tried to reach him, but too late.

"You can thank me properly when I've rescued them for you," Father Herrick declared. He eyed the treasure box meaningly for an instant before plunging down the shaft after of the last of the lizards.

Merlin's curses rose to heaven on a spiral stair of frosty breath. Olivia attempted to calm the wizard.

"He'll be all right. It's all feathers down there, remember?" she said. "And I don't think he'll land on any of the lizards. Just have someone go fetch the ladder again and --"

"Woman, I know he won't land on the lizards," Merlin snapped. any good da'd let some raving git squash his children! Never mind the bloody ladder."

Olivia wanted to ask why not. It was an innocent question, quite reasonable and harmless, but it never did get asked. A roar from below shook the village, flinging everyone but the wizard flat. The trestle collapsed into its component boards and sawhorses. Basins of soapy water tumbled across the snowy ground. A geyser of sulfurous flame gushed from the shaft to overtop the square-built church.

And then there was silence. Merlin gave Olivia a hand up. She clung to him as a shipwreck victim might adhere to a coastal rock and whimpered, "What was that?"

The wizard shrugged. "That was Hob."

Lady Battle-Purfitt had to answer the door herself, all the servants being busy elsewhere. The dark-suited young man tipped his hat to her respectfully.

"M'lady, I believe you're expecting me. Inspector William Jenks, Scotland Yard."

Her ladyship looked ruffled -- worse, she looked entirely at sixes and sevens, although the man with the courage to tell her this to her face had not yet been

born. "Yes, yes, of course, come in." She shooed him into the nearest room, which turned out to be a rather cramped chamber whose walls were lined with glass-fronted cupboards. Most of the chairs within were occupied by prettily wrapped boxes of various shapes, some already open, some not. "Wedding gifts," her ladyship said briefly. She cleared a place for herself and left the Inspector to his own devices.

"I apologize if I have come at an inconvenient time, m'lady," the Inspector said, moving a large cardboard box to the floor with a hearty thump. "It was unavoidable."

"You have come at the most inconvenient time, young man. My only child, my dear son Telemachus is being married today. The ceremony is in point of fact about to begin. I hope you will join us." She made the invitation sound less than inviting.

"Thank you, m'lady, I'd be honored." Inspector Jenks was only capable of picking up clues at the scene of a crime. "What I've got to do here won't take up too much of your time. We're investigating the vanishment of one Father John Herrick, vicar of Staddle-upon-Truss. He was last seen in the company of your son and a Miss Olivia Drummond some time before Christmas."

"Miss Drummond is my son's fiancée."

"Then she'd be here?"

"I believe that is the custom for brides on their wedding day." Lady Battle-Purfitt's voice was hung with frost enough to slaughter a whole crop of garden marrows. "You may speak with her after the ceremony, should you still feel the need. However, I can tell you straight off what has become of Father Herrick. We have, in fact, been expecting you to call for quite some time. I only wonder that it took you so long to investigate the matter."

"His curate fell ill the Sunday after Boxing Day and could not officiate. It was the first time Father Herrick was missed," Inspector Jenks admitted. "His precise whereabouts are a mystery, but --"

"No mystery. Here he is," said her ladyship. "And here he stays."

"A guest? He might've called someone."

"Hardly. Dead, you know." Lady Battle-Purfitt folded her hands on the skirt of her blue moire gown. "Drowned. He discovered a bog on the premises of Earl's

Benefice and insisted it was a sacrificial site. I forbade him to explore it, on the sensible grounds that it was a hazard no sane person would approach too closely. Clearly I misjudged the late vicar's level of common sense. He defied me, seeking it out without my knowledge or consent, having first dispatched my son and Miss Drummond on a wild goose chase to observe some absurd local agricultural custom. They are avid preservationists, you know. On their return, they inquired after him. I said I thought he had gone with them, they were led to believe he had remained behind with me."

"Slippy beggar," the inspector muttered.

"Please, Inspector Jenks, de mortuis, nil nisi bonum," her ladyship chided. "We sought, but all we found were a few of his personal effects hard by the bog." She rose majestically and fetched a fountain pen, two pencils, a notebook, and a muddy pamphlet from one of the cupboards. "You may view it and them at your pleasure." She dropped the items in his lap.

Inspector Jenks eyed the pitiful remains, took a small pad from his breast pocket, made a few notes, then closed it with a snap. "Just a quick look at the bog later on, m'lady. Drowned, eh? Poor chap. Tricky things, bogs. Likely we shan't be able to recover the body if it's a deep 'un. Well, can't be helped. We heard as how he was dead keen on ancient lore and all that. Now he's just dead, eh?" His plummy chuckle was left to wither and perish under the blaze of Lady Battle-Purfitt's scornful look.

"If you have no further inquiries to make, will you excuse me?" She gestured toward the door. "The wedding you know."

"Oh, aye, mustn't detain the festivities, what?" Inspector Jenks was going to jolly up Lady Battle-Purfitt or die in the attempt. Wise money was already being laid as to the design of his coffin. "All quite simple here, cut and dried-- only not so dry as all that for poor Father Herrick, I'd say-- nothing unusual, case closed, nothing out of the ordinary at all." He was still nattering on as the door closed behind them.

For a time, the room was still. Then the lid of the box which the inspector had dropped to the floor stirred and lifted. A blunt snout protruded, beaky nostrils twitching. A crested head knocked the lid clean off. The box rocked back and forth as taloned paws clung to the lip, then the cardboard cube tumbled over onto its side, spilling out its living contents.

The creature crawled across the carpet to where the inspector had let fall Father Herrick's last effects. After a few precursory snuffles it chewed up the pencils with relish, then nibbled the pen. The taste of plastic proved an unpleasant surprise. In a passion, the beast let out a roar that shattered the glass of every cupboard in the room. It lashed its tail and broke a chair leg. Still peered, it glowered at the muddy pamphlet, the vertical pupils of its yellow eyes thin and unforgiving as the edge of a sword.

A puff of fiery breath and Stilby-Nash's monograph on the strange rites of Greater Ambrose Surlesard was ash.

Satisfied, Hob's child curled its tail around its nose and went to sleep.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): "In my last show I was cast as an assistant to a magician."