

MIDSUMMER'S EVE

WILL SAID, turning a page, 'He liked woad. He says – listen – *The decoction of Woad drunken is good for wounds in bodies of a strong constitution, as of country people, and such as are accustomed to great labour and hard coarse fare.*'

'Such as me, and all other members of Her Majesty's Navy,' Stephen said. With great precision he pulled a tall, heavy-headed stem of grass out of its sheath, and lay back in the field nibbling it.

'Woad,' said James, wiping a mist of sweat from his plump pink face. 'That's the blue stuff the Ancient Britons used to paint themselves with.'

Will said, 'Gerard says here that woad flowers are yellow.'

James said rather pompously, 'Well, I've done a year's more history than you have and I know they

used it for blue.’ There was a pause. He added, ‘Green walnuts turn your fingers black.’

‘Oh, well,’ said Will. A very large velvety bee, overloaded with pollen, landed on his book and waddled dispiritedly across the page. Will blew it gently on to a leaf, pushing back the straight brown forelock that flopped over his eyes. His glance was caught by a movement on the river beyond the field where they lay.

‘Look! Swans!’

Lazy as the hot summer day, a pair of swans sailed slowly by without a sound; their small wake lapped at the riverbank.

‘Where?’ said James, clearly with no intention of looking.

‘They like this bit of the river, it’s always quiet. The big boats stay over in the main reach, even on a Saturday.’

‘Who’s coming fishing?’ said Stephen. But he still lay unmoving on his back, one leg folded over the other, the slender stem of grass swaying between his teeth.

‘In a minute.’ James stretched, yawning. ‘I ate too much cake.’

‘Mum’s picnics are as huge as ever.’ Stephen rolled over and gazed at the grey-green river. ‘When I was your age, you couldn’t fish at all in this part of the Thames. Pollution, then. Some things do improve.’

‘A paltry few,’ Will said sepulchrally, out of the grass.

Stephen grinned. He reached out and picked a slender green stalk with a tiny red flower; solemnly he held it up. ‘Scarlet pimpernel. *Open for sun, closed for rain, that’s the poor man’s weathervane.* Granddad taught me that. Pity you never knew him. What does your friend Mr Gerard say about this one, Will?’

‘Mmm?’ Will was lying on his side, watching the weary bumblebee flex its wings.

‘Book,’ James said. ‘Scarlet pimpernel.’

‘Oh.’ Will turned the crackling pages. ‘Here it is. Oh lovely. *The juyce purgeth the head by gargarising or washing the throat therewith; it cures the toothach being snift up into the nosethrils, especially into the contrary nosethril.*’

‘The contrary nosethril, of course,’ Stephen said gravely.

‘He also says it’s good against the stinging of vipers and other venomous beasts.’

‘Daft,’ said James.

‘No it’s not,’ Will said mildly. ‘Just three hundred years old. There’s one super bit at the end where he tells you very seriously how barnacle geese are hatched out of barnacles.’

‘The Caribbean might have foxed him,’ Stephen said. ‘Millions of barnacles, but not one barnacle goose.’

James said, ‘Will you go back there, after your leave?’

‘Wherever their Lordships send us, mate.’ Stephen threaded the scarlet pimpernel into the top buttonhole

of his shirt, and unfolded his lanky body. 'Come on. Fish.'

'I'll come in a minute. You two go.' Will lay idly watching as they fitted rods together, tied hooks and floats. Grasshoppers skirled unseen from the grass, chirruping their solos over the deep summer insect hum: it was a sleepy, lulling sound. He sighed with happiness. Sunshine and high summer and, rarer than either, his eldest brother home from sea. The world smiled on him; nothing could possibly be improved. He felt his eyelids droop; he jerked them apart again. Again they closed in sleepy content; again he forced them open. For a flicker of a moment he wondered why he would not let himself fall harmlessly asleep.

And then he knew.

The swans were there on the river again, slow-moving white shapes, drifting back upstream. Over Will's head the trees sighed in the breeze, like waves on distant oceans. In tiny yellow-green bunches the flowers of the sycamore scattered the long grass around him. Running one of them between his fingers, he watched Stephen standing tall a few yards off threading his fishing line through his rod. Beyond, on the river, he could see one of the swans moving slowly ahead of its mate. The bird passed Stephen.

But as it passed, it did not disappear behind Stephen. Will could see the white form clearly through the outline of Stephen's body.

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And through the outline of the swan, in turn, he could see a steep slope of land, grassy, without trees, that had not been there before.

Will swallowed.

‘Steve?’ he said.

His eldest brother was close before him, knotting a leader on his line, and Will had spoken loudly. But Stephen did not hear. James came past, holding his rod erect but low as he fastened the hook safely into its cork handle. Will could still see, through him, the forms of the swans as if in a faint mist. He sat up and stretched out his hand to the rod as James went by, and his fingers moved through the substance of the wood as if there had been nothing there.

And Will knew, with dread and delight, that a part of his life which had been sleeping was broad awake once more.

His brothers walked off to the river, moving diagonally across the field. Through their phantom forms Will could see the only earth that in this elusive patch of time was for him solid and real: the grassy slope, its edges merging into mistiness. And on it he saw figures, running, bustling, driven by some urgent haste. If he stared at them too hard, they were not there. But if he gazed with sleepy eyes, not quite focused, he could see them all, sun-dappled, hurrying.

They were small, dark-haired. They belonged to a very distant time. They wore tunics of blue, green or

black; he saw one woman in white, with a string of bright blue beads about her neck. They were gathering bundles of spears, arrows, tools, sticks; packing pots into wrappings of animal skin; putting together packages of what he supposed was meat, in dry rippled strips. There were dogs with them: full-haired dogs with short pointed muzzles. Children ran and called, and a dog lifted his head to bay, but no sound came. For Will's ears, only the grasshoppers chirruped, over the deep insect hum.

He saw no animals but the dogs. These people were travellers; not belonging here, but passing through. He was not even sure whether the land on which they stood, in their own time, lay in his own part of the Thames Valley or in some totally different place. But he knew one thing very clearly, suddenly: they were all very much afraid.

Often they raised their heads, fearfully, and gazed away to the east. They spoke seldom to one another, but worked on, hastily. Something, someone, was coming, threatening them, driving them on. They were running away. Will found himself catching the sense of urgency, willing them to hurry, to escape whatever disaster was on its way. Whatever disaster . . . He too stared eastward. But it was hard to tell what he saw. A strange double landscape lay before him, a firm curving slope visible through the phantom misty lines of the flat fields and hedges of his own day and

the glimmering half-seen Thames. The swans were still there, and yet not there; one of them dipped its elegant neck to the surface of the water, ghostly as an image reflected in a windowpane . . .

. . . and all at once, the swan was real, solid, opaque, and Will was no longer looking out of his own time into another. The travellers were gone, out of sight in that other summer day thousands of years before. Will shut his eyes, desperately trying to hold some image of them before it faded from his memory. He remembered a pot glinting with the dull sheen of bronze; a cluster of arrows tipped with sharp black flakes of flint; he remembered the dark skin and eyes of the woman in white, and the bright luminous blue of the string of beads about her neck. Most of all he remembered the sense of fear.

He stood up in the long grass, holding his book; he could feel his legs trembling. Unseen in a tree over his head, a song thrush poured out its trilling twice-over song. Will walked shakily towards the river; James's voice hailed him.

'Will! Over here! Come and see!'

He veered blindly towards the sound. Stephen the purist fisherman stood casting delicately out into the river, his line whispering through the air. James was threading a worm on to his hook. He put it down, and triumphantly held up a cluster of three small perch tied through the gills.

‘Goodness,’ Will said. ‘That’s quick!’

Before he could regret the word, James was raising an eyebrow. ‘Not specially. You been asleep? Come on, get your rod.’

‘No,’ said Will, to both question and command. Stephen, glancing round at him, suddenly let his line go slack. He looked hard at Will, frowning.

‘Will? Are you all right? You look –’

‘I do feel a bit funny,’ Will said.

‘Sun, I bet. Beating down on the back of your neck, while you were sitting there reading that book.’

‘Probably.’

‘Even in England it can get pretty fierce, matey. Flaming June. And Midsummer’s Eve, at that . . . Go and lie down in the shade for a while. And drink the rest of that lemonade.’

‘All of it?’ said James indignantly. ‘What about us?’

Stephen aimed a kick at him. ‘You catch ten more perch and I’ll buy you a drink on the way home. Go on, Will. Under the trees.’

‘All right,’ said Will.

‘I told you that book was daft,’ James said.

Will crossed the field again and sat down on the cool grass beneath the sycamore trees, beside the remains of their picnic tea. Sipping lemonade slowly from a plastic cup, he looked uneasily out at the river – but all was normal. The swans had gone. Midges danced in the air; the world was hazy with

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heat. His head ached; he put aside the cup and lay on his back in the grass, looking up. Leaves danced above him; the branches breathed and swayed, to and fro, to and fro, shifting green patterns against the blue sky. Will pressed his palms to his eyes, remembering the faint hurrying forms that had flickered up to him out of the past; remembering the fear . . .

Even afterwards, he could never tell whether he fell asleep. The sighing of the breeze seemed to grow louder, more fierce; all at once he could see different trees above him, beech trees, their heart-shaped leaves dancing agitated in a wilder swirl than sycamore or oak. And this now was not a hedge line of trees stretching unbroken to the river, but a copse; the river was gone, the sound and smell of it, and on either side of him Will could see the open sky. He sat up.

He was high over the wooded valley of the Thames on a curving grassy slope; the cluster of beech trees around him marked the top of the hill like a cap. Golden vetch grew in the short springy grass at his side; from one of the curled flowers a small blue butterfly fluttered to his hand and away again. There was no more heavy hum of insects in valley fields; instead, high over his head through the stirring of the wind, a skylark's song poured bubbling into the air.

And then, somewhere, Will heard voices. He turned his head. A string of people came hurrying up the hill, each darting from one tree or bush to the next, avoiding

the open slope. The first two or three had just reached a curious deep hole sunk into the hill, so closely overgrown by brush that he would not have noticed it if they had not been there, tugging branches aside. They were laden with bundles wrapped in rough dark cloth – but so hastily wrapped that Will could see the contents jutting through. He blinked: there were gold cups, plates, chalices, a great gold cross crusted with jewels, tall candlesticks of gold and silver, robes and cloths of glimmering silk woven with gold and gems; the array of treasure seemed endless. The figures bound each bundle with rope, and lowered one after another into the hole. Will saw a man in the robes of a monk, who seemed to be supervising them: directing, explaining, always keeping a nervous watch out over the surrounding land.

A trio of small boys came hurrying up to the top of the hill, despatched by the pointing arm of the priest. Will stood up slowly. But the boys trotted past him without even a glance, ignoring him so completely that he knew he was in this past time only an observer, invisible, not able even to be sensed.

The boys paused on the edge of the copse, and stood looking out keenly across the valley; they had clearly been sent to keep watch from there. Looking at them huddled nervously together, Will let his mind dwell on hearing them, and in a moment the voices were echoing in his head.

‘No one coming this way.’

‘Not yet.’

‘Two hours maybe, the runner said. I heard him talking to my father, he said there’s hundreds of them, terrible, rampaging along the Old Way. They’ve burned London, he said, you could see the black smoke rising in great clouds –’

‘They cut off your ears if they catch you. The boys. The men they slit right open, and they do even worse things to the women and girls –’

‘My father knew they’d come. He said. There was blood instead of rain fell in the east last month, he said, and men saw dragons flying in the sky.’

‘There’s always signs like that, before the heathen devils come.’

‘What’s the use of burying the treasures? Nobody’ll ever come back to get them. Nobody ever comes back when the devils drive them out.’

‘Maybe this time.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘Who knows? To the west –’

Urgent voices called the boys back; they ran. The hiding of bundles in the hole was finished, and some of the figures already scurrying down the hill. Will watched fascinated while the last men heaved over the top of the hole a great flat flint boulder, the largest he had ever seen. They fitted it neatly inside the opening like a kind of lid, then unrolled over the top a section of grassy sod. Branches growing from surrounding

bushes were tugged across the top. In a moment there was no sign of any hiding place, no scar on the hillside to show that the hasty work had even taken place. Crying out in alarm, one of the men pointed across the valley; beyond the next hill a thick column of smoke was rising. At once, in panic, all the group fled down the grass-skinned chalk slope, slipping and leaping, the monkish figure as hasty and helter-skelter as the rest.

And Will was swept by a wave of fear so intense that it turned his stomach. For a moment he knew, as vividly as these fugitives, the animal terror of cruel violent death: of pain, of hurting, of hate. Or of something worse than hate: a dreadful remote blankness, that took joy only from destruction and tormenting and others' fear. Some terrible threat was advancing, on these people just as on those others, shadowy forms he had seen in a different, distant past a little while before. Over there in the east, the threat was once more rising, roaring down.

'It's coming,' Will said aloud, staring at the column of smoke, trying not to envision what might happen when its makers came over the brow of the hill. '*It's coming -*'

James's voice said, full of a curious excitement, 'No it isn't, it's not moving at all. Are you awake? *Look!*'

Stephen said, 'What an extraordinary thing!'

Their voices were above Will's head; he was lying on his back in cool grass. It was a moment before he

could recollect himself, and stop shaking. He heaved himself up on to his elbows, and saw Stephen and James standing a few paces away, their hands full of rods and fish and bait pails. They were staring at something in a kind of wary fascination. Will craned his head round to the hot humming meadow, to see what held them. And he gasped, as his mind was half torn apart by a great wave of that same blind terror that had swamped him a moment before, a world and ten centuries and yet no more than a breath away.

Ten yards off in the grass, a small black animal was standing motionless, facing him: a lithe, lean animal perhaps a foot and a half long with a long tail and sinuous, curving back. It was like a stoat or a weasel and yet it was neither. Its sleek fur was pitch black from nose to tail; its unwinking black eyes were fixed unmistakably on Will. And from it he felt a pulsing ferocity of viciousness and evil so strong that his mind rebelled against believing it could exist.

James made a sudden quick hissing sound.

The black creature did not move. Still it stared at Will. Will sat staring back, caught up in the unreasoning shout of terror that twanged on through his brain. Out of the corner of his eye he was aware of Stephen's tall form standing at his side, very still.

James said softly, 'I know what it is. It's a mink. They've just started turning up round here – I saw it

in the paper. Like weasels, only nastier, it said. Look at those eyes –’

Impulsively breaking the tension, he yelled wordlessly at the creature and slashed the grass with his fishing rod. Swiftly, but without panic, the black mink turned and slid away through the field towards the river, its long back undulating with a strange unpleasant gliding movement like a large snake. James bounded after it, still clasping his rod.

‘Be careful!’ Stephen called sharply.

James shouted, ‘I won’t touch it. Got my rod . . .’ He disappeared along the riverbank, past a clump of stubby willow.

‘I don’t like this,’ Stephen said.

‘No,’ Will said. He shivered, looking at the place in the field where the animal had stood, staring at him with its intent black eyes. ‘Creepy.’

‘I don’t mean just the mink, if that’s what it was.’ There was an unfamiliar note in Stephen’s voice that made Will abruptly turn his head. He moved to get to his feet, but his tall brother squatted down beside him, arms resting on knees, hands fiddling with the wire leader on a piece of fishing line.

Stephen wound the line round his finger and back again, round and back again.

‘Will,’ he said in this strange taut voice. ‘I’ve got to talk to you. Now, while James is off chasing that thing. I’ve been trying to get you alone ever since I

came home – I hoped today, only Jamie wanted to fish –’

He floundered, stumbling over his words in a way that filled Will with astonishment and alarm, coming from the cool adult brother who had always been so much his symbol of everything fulfilled, complete, grown up. Then Stephen brought his head up and stared at Will almost belligerently, and Will stared nervously back.

Stephen said, ‘When the ship was in Jamaica last year, I sent you a big West Indian carnival head, for a Christmas and birthday present put together.’

‘Well of course,’ Will said. ‘It’s super. We were all looking at it only yesterday.’

Stephen went on, ignoring him. ‘I’d got it from an old Jamaican who grabbed me one day in the street, out of nowhere, in the middle of Carnival. He told me my name, and he said I was to give the head to you. And when I asked how on earth he knew me, he said, *There is a look that we Old Ones have. Our families have something of it too.*’

‘I know about all that,’ Will said brightly, swallowing the foreboding that hollowed his throat. ‘You sent a letter, with the head. Don’t you remember?’

‘I remember it was a damn funny thing for a stranger to say,’ Stephen said. ‘*Old One, we Old Ones.* With capital letters – you could *hear* them.’

‘Oh, not really. Surely – I mean, you said he was an old man –’

‘Will,’ Stephen said, looking at him with cold blue eyes, ‘the day we sailed from Kingston, that old man turned up at the ship. I don’t know how he talked them into it, but someone was sent to fetch me to him. He stood there on the dock, with his black, black face and his white, white hair, and he looked quietly at the rating who’d fetched me, until the boy left, and then he said just one thing. *Tell your brother*, he said, *that the Old Ones of the ocean islands are ready*. Then he went away.’

Will said nothing. He knew there would be more. He looked at Stephen’s hands; they were clenched, and one thumb was flicking automatically to and fro over its fist.

‘And then,’ Stephen said, his voice shaking a little, ‘we put in at Gibraltar on the way home, and I had half a day ashore, and a stranger said something to me in the street. He was standing beside me, we were waiting for a traffic light – he was very tall and slim; Arab, I think. Do you know what he said? *Tell Will Stanton that the Old Ones of the south are ready*. Then he just disappeared into the crowd.’

‘Oh,’ Will said.

The thumb abruptly stopped moving on Stephen’s hand. He stood up, in one swift movement like a released spring. Will too scrambled to his feet, blinking up, unable to read the suntanned face against the bright sky.

‘Either I’m going out of my head,’ Stephen said, ‘or you’re mixed up in something very strange, Will. In either case you might have a little more to say to me than *Oh*. I told you, I don’t like it, not one bit.’

‘The trouble is, you see,’ Will said slowly, ‘that if I tried to explain, you wouldn’t believe me.’

‘Try me,’ his brother said.

Will sighed. Of all the nine Stanton children, he was the youngest and Stephen the oldest; there were fifteen long years between them, and until Stephen had left home to join the Navy, a smaller Will had shadowed him everywhere in silent devotion. He knew now that he was at the ending of something he had hoped would never end.

He said, ‘Are you sure? You won’t laugh at me, you won’t . . . judge?’

‘Of course not,’ Stephen said.

Will took a deep breath. ‘Well then. It’s like this . . . This where we live is a world of men, ordinary men, and although in it there is the Old Magic of the earth, and the Wild Magic of living things, it is men who control what the world shall be like.’ He was not looking at Stephen, for fear of seeing the changing expression that he knew he would certainly see. ‘But beyond the world is the universe, bound by the law of the High Magic, as every universe must be. And beneath the High Magic are two . . . poles . . . that we call the Dark and the Light. No other power orders

them. They merely exist. The Dark seeks by its dark nature to influence men so that in the end, through them, it may control the earth. The Light has the task of stopping that from happening. From time to time the Dark has come rising and has been driven back, but now very soon it will rise for the last and most perilous time. It has been gathering strength for that rising, and it is almost ready. And therefore, for the last time, until the end of Time, we must drive it back so that the world of men may be free.'

'We?' Stephen said, expressionless.

'We are the Old Ones,' Will said, strong and self-confident now. 'There is a great circle of us, all over the world and beyond the world, from all places and all corners of time. I was the last one to be born, and when I was brought into my power as an Old One, on my eleventh birthday, the circle became complete. I knew nothing about all this, till then. But the time is coming closer now, and that is why you were given the reassurances – warnings, in a way – to bring to me, I think from two of the three oldest of the circle.'

Stephen said, in the same flat voice, 'The second one didn't look very old.'

Will looked up at him and said simply, 'Nor do I.'

'For God's sake,' Stephen said irritably, 'you're my little brother and you're twelve years old and I can remember you being born.'

'In one sense only,' Will said.

Stephen stared in exasperation at the figure before him: the stocky small boy in blue jeans and battered shirt, with straight brown hair falling untidily over one eye. 'Will, you're too old for these silly games. You sound almost as if you believed all this stuff.'

Will said calmly, 'What do you think those two messengers were, then, Steve? You think I'm smuggling diamonds, maybe, or part of a drug ring?'

Stephen groaned. 'I don't know. Perhaps I dreamt them . . . perhaps I really am going out of my head.' The tone tried to be light, but there was unmistakable strain in his voice.

'Oh no,' Will said. 'You didn't dream them. Other . . . warnings . . . have begun coming too.' He fell silent for a moment, thinking of the anxious hurrying figures looming misty out of a time three thousand years past, and the Saxon boys, after that, watching terrified for the marauding Danes. Then he looked sadly at Stephen.

'It's too much for you,' he said. 'They should have known that. I suppose they did. The messages had to come by word of mouth, that's the only way secure from the Dark. And after that it's up to me . . .' Quickly he seized his brother's arm, pointing, as the incomprehension on Stephen's face began changing unbearably to alarm. 'Look – there's James.'

Automatically Stephen half turned to look. The movement made his leg brush against a low bramble clump growing out into the field from the trees

and hedge behind. And out of the sprawling green bush rose a flickering, sudden cloud of delicate white moths. They were an astonishing sight, feathery, exquisite. Endlessly flowing upward, hundred upon hundred, they fluttered like a gentle snow flurry round Stephen's head and shoulders. Startled, he flapped his arms to brush them away.

'Stay still,' Will said softly. 'Don't hurt them. Stay still.'

Stephen paused, one arm raised apprehensively before his face. Over and around him the tiny moths flurried, round and around, wheeling, floating, never settling, drifting down. They were like infinitely small birds fashioned of snowflakes; silent, ghostly, each tiny wing a filigree of five delicate feathers, all white.

Stephen stood still, dazed, shielding his face with one hand. 'They're beautiful! But so many . . . What are they?'

'Plume moths,' Will said, looking at him with a strange loving regret, like a farewell. 'White plume moths. There's an old saying, that they carry memories away.'

In one last whirl the white cloud of moths flowed and fluttered round Stephen's uncertain head; then the cloud parted, dispersing like smoke, as in the same curious communion the moths disappeared into the hedge. The leaves enfolded them; they were gone.

James came thudding up behind them. 'Gosh, what a chase! It was a mink – must have been.'

‘Mink?’ Stephen said. He shook his head suddenly, like a dog newly come out of water.

James stared at him. ‘The mink. The little black animal.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Stephen said hastily, still looking dazed. ‘Yes. It was a mink, then?’

James was bubbling with triumph. ‘I’m sure it was. What a piece of luck! I’ve been watching out for one ever since that article in the *Observer*. It told you to, because they’re a pest. They eat chickens, and all kinds of birds. Someone brought them over from America, years ago, to breed them for the fur, and a few escaped and went wild.’

‘Where did he go?’ said Will.

‘Jumped into the river. I didn’t know they could swim.’

Stephen picked up the picnic basket. ‘Time we took the fish home. Hand me that lemonade bottle, Will.’

James said promptly, ‘You said you’d get me a drink on the way back.’

‘I said, if you caught ten more fish.’

‘Seven’s pretty close.’

‘Not close enough.’

‘Stingy lot, sailors,’ said James.

‘Here,’ said Will, poking him with the bottle. ‘I didn’t drink all the lemonade anyway.’

‘Go on, Sponge,’ said Stephen. ‘Finish it.’ One corner of the basket was fraying; he tried to weave the

loose ends of wicker together, while James gulped his lemonade.

Will said, 'Falling to bits, that basket. Looks as though it belonged to the Old Ones.'

'Who?' said Stephen.

'The Old Ones. In the letter you sent me from Jamaica, with that big carnival head, last year. Something the old man said, the one who gave you it. Don't you remember?'

'Good Lord no,' said Stephen amiably. 'Much too long ago.' He chuckled. 'That was a crazy present all right, wasn't it? Like the stuff Max makes at art school.'

'Yes,' Will said.

They strolled home, through the long feathery grass, through the lengthening shadows of the trees, through the yellow-green flowers of the sycamore.