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The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

Three Unpublished *Kingdoms of Elfin* Stories: 'Snipe', 'The Alien Element' and 'The Pursuit and the End'

Sylvia Townsend Warner*

*(1893–1978)

How to cite: Warner, S.T. 'Three Unpublished *Kingdoms of Elfin* Stories: "Snipe", "The Alien Element" and "The Pursuit and the End"'. *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2025(1), pp. 4–44 • DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/STW.25.1.02.

Published: 10 December 2025

Abstract

These three previously unpublished stories by Sylvia Townsend Warner are part of her *Kingdoms of Elfin* series. The first of the three, 'Snipe', is set in Elizabethan England in the fairy kingdom of Arden. A fairy called Snipe imprudently stands as godfather to a mortal village boy. In the fairy world, Snipe writes and acts for the theatre and wins an 'Indian Boy' as his pageboy from Queen Titania and her consort Oberon. His return to the mortal world with the pageboy leads to the violent outcome of the story. 'The Alien Element' is set in Edinburgh in the mid-seventeenth century. A witch who has been condemned to death is rescued by fairies and taken to live at the fairy court of Givenny. 'The Pursuit and the End' is set in the Elfin court of Brocéliande. Sir Verdigris, a court functionary, becomes obsessed by the deliciousness of a snail dish once prepared at Brocéliande by a cook who has left. He goes off in quest of the exquisitely cooked snails, accompanied by his valet, cat and groom.

Keywords Elfin; fairies; Arden; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Ramon Llull; hermeticism; Elizabethan drama; witches; witch trials; outsiders; persecution; cookery; medieval France; Lutins; pastoral poetry

Three Unpublished *Kingdoms of Elfin* Stories: 'Snipe', 'The Alien Element' and 'The Pursuit and the End'

Sylvia Townsend Warner

Editorial note: Warner's collection of 16 fairy stories, Kingdoms of Elfin*, was published in January 1977. Fourteen had previously appeared in* The New Yorker *but she had heard from the magazine in April the previous year that they were not looking to take any more Elfin stories. But Warner had not finished with the series. She wrote to David Garnett on 31 May 1977 that 'I am still finding out more about them. If I am spared, I may do another volume. There are three stories already – and a heavenly amount of research involved. Oberon, for instance, was a hermeticist, and had a Lullian Wheel, and a bowl of prophetic goldfish'.*[1] *Garnett would have enjoyed the pleasantly heterodox idea of heavenly researches into fairies. Whatever else Warner's various fairies are, they are not heavenly. Oberon's goldfish and his Wheel feature in 'Snipe', one of three Elfin stories printed here for the first time, along with 'The Alien Element' and 'The Pursuit and the End'. The* Times Literary Supplement *is publishing 'The Pursuit and the End' on 12 December 2025, more or less simultaneously with the production of this Journal.*

Susanna Pinney confirms that Warner was planning a further volume of Elfins, and these three stories would almost certainly have been part of it. They would have taken their place along with four other Elfin tales not included in Kingdoms of Elfin*. These four are 'An Improbable Story', 'Narrative of the Events Preceding the Death of Queen Ermine', 'Queen Mousie' and 'The Duke of Orkney's Leonardo'. They were published after Warner's death in the collection* One Thing Leading to Another *(1984) and more recently reprinted in Kate Macdonald's selection* Of Cats and Elfins *(2020). 'The Duke of Orkney's Leonardo' had previously appeared in* The New Yorker *on 20 September 1976, the last of the Elfin series to be included there.*

Of the three newly published stories below, at least two – and probably all three – were rejected by The New Yorker. *William Maxwell, as one of Warner's literary executors, sent the typescripts of 'Snipe' and 'The Pursuit and the End' to the Dorset archive with a note describing them as 'Written "on speculation" for* The New Yorker *and turned down by Mr Shawn'.*[2] *As Warner's main editor at the magazine, Maxwell had been enthusiastic about the Elfin stories and seen most of them through to publication, but by 1976 he had stepped down. He did not include 'The Alien Element' with the stories written 'on speculation', but it seems likely that this was a* New Yorker *reject too.*

Susanna Pinney was working as Warner's typist in the 1970s, as she describes in 'Sylvia, a Memoir', and remembers typing the stories. She mentions in the memoir that The New Yorker *turned down a couple of stories that 'might have been too English to suit American readers', and in a recent email she explains further: 'As I remember it, Snipe was quite an early story in the series, but it was turned down by William because stories with that emphasis on Shakespeare and his period, did not fit the New Yorker policy.'*[3] *(Although the letter to Garnett sounds as if she was writing 'Snipe' in 1977, she might well have been reviewing or revising it then with the new volume in mind.) A similar problem about British historical settings might have applied to the third story, 'The Alien Element', which is set mainly in Edinburgh at the time of the seventeenth-century witch trials, and which Susanna Pinney also remembers as one of the stories not taken by the magazine.*

The stories in Kingdoms of Elfin *are self-contained and the book is not a consecutive narrative, but some of its figures appear in more than one tale and some also reappear in the unpublished stories below. Most notably,* Kingdoms of Elfin *includes a kind of sequel to 'Snipe'. This was 'The Climate of Exile', which follows Snipe to Catmere after his banishment from the fairy court of Arden; it was one of the two tales in the collection not published in* The New Yorker. *The story 'Snipe' features various characters from English literature's most famous fairy story,* A Midsummer Night's Dream. *Titania and Oberon both appear (the latter demoted by Warner from king to consort), as does the Indian Boy (who also gets a brief mention in Warner's story 'Hamlet in England').*[4] *And elsewhere in* Kingdoms of Elfin *she gave a literary afterlife to Shakespeare's Puck, who appears in 'The Mortal Milk' and 'Beliard'. Another recurring figure is 'Dando the Cosmographer', the main character in 'Beliard' from* Kingdoms of Elfin*; he is celebrated in 'The Pursuit and the End' in a set of memorial verses (almost certainly mediocre) by its protagonist Sir Verdigris.*

On 27 February 1977 Warner noted in her diary that 'I was worrying at Verdigris when Antonia came'.[5] *She sent 'The Pursuit and the End' to* The New Yorker *two months later on 30 April: 'Faithful to my First Reading Agreement, I send this story which I assume you will have to send back – but I hope with some regret, since it is – I think – a good one.' The magazine did duly decline it (Daniel Menaker, her new editor, wrote that 'it just doesn't seem like the right thing to revive this series in our pages right now'), but they published three of Warner's non-Elfin stories in 1976 and 1977, so her rueful complaint to Mavis Gallant that 'Mr Shawn doesn't like me … Vieux singe ne plaît à personne'*[6] *was not quite fair. William Maxwell, editing the volume of* Letters *including this one, points out dryly in an editorial footnote that* The New Yorker *published 95 of her stories during Shawn's editorship. Susanna Pinney suggests that 'Mr Shawn's argument was that there had been too many Elfin ones published too near together and they needed to balance the magazine with non-fantasy stories for a while.'*[7] *Mr Shawn was fairy-averse, not Warner-averse. At any rate, it seems more from mischance than intent that these three excellent stories have not been published until now.*

Snipe

It would be strange if William Shakespeare never encountered a fairy. He was born on the outskirts of the Kingdom of Arden and must often have played truant there when he was a child. Arden was the most flourishing Kingdom in Britain, and only slightly less long-established than Llwyn Onn in Wales and Catmere in Northumberland, where the continuous scornful tee-heeing of fairies exasperated the builders of Hadrian's Wall. They can be heard tee-heeing to this day: archaeologists say it is the wind blowing over the bents. Catmere preserved its solitary tenure because nobody wanted it. Leafy, well-watered Arden was commandeered by mortal prosperity and is now a suburb of Birmingham.

To return to Shakespeare. Even if he never encountered a fairy, he was certainly conversant with their way of life and their characteristic mixture of stateliness and pleasure-loving. For purposes of poetry he viewed the lesser fry through a diminishing glass and put them to bed in nutshells (for purposes of stage production he contented himself with life-sizes), but he had no taint of the post-renaissance classicism which would have peopled Arden with nymphs and dryads. Oberon and Titania are products of understanding, not theory: they are infinitely more credible than Richard the Third.

But Shakespeare was still playing truant in Arden when Snipe had the misfortune to become a godparent – he brought it on himself, which made it the more regrettable.

When Snipe was a boy his bright eyes and ready smile caught the attention of Sir Sagamore, Master of the Revels. The eyes were small and deep-set like winkles, and the smile flashed from ear to ear, and the ears were like pot-handles. But Sir Sagamore did not want a Ganymede, he wanted a page, and was in a hurry, and thought Snipe would do nicely to run errands, pick things up, find his spectacles, mend his pens, and in time figure as an Ancient Briton. Three times a year, under the Ram, the Crab, and the Scorpion, Arden revelled ceremonially, and for each of these occasions Sir Sagamore wrote a new Historical Tragedy. Some were more historical than tragical, others *vice versa*. All were about the Ancient Britons. They were rehearsed for weeks and produced with historical accuracy: warriors in woad or fur, heroines with flaxen plaits, Druids in white with white woollen beards and eyebrows. There was also a White Horse, fully jointed and worked from inside by two strong fairies. The horse, with other stage properties (battle-axes, eyebrows, gyves, thunder-sheet, lanterns, boars'-heads, mistletoe, etc.) were kept under

lock and key in Sir Sagamore's shed, and one of Snipe's first jobs was to polish it. Later, he prompted. This was a taxing honour, for the speeches, in eights and tens, were long and the sentiments slipped the memory.

A tragic-historical drama is expected to include passages in comic relief, where rustics take over the scene and supply a sub-plot. Sagamore was never at a loss for appropriate eights and tens for his main characters – kings, warriors, priests, usurpers, sorcerers, virgins, goblins and so forth. In one of his most admired plays, where the Ancient Britons, outmanned, out-fought, out-sorcerered, had lost heart and were preparing to yield, the horse burst into such fiery eloquence, and quoted so many examples of patriotism from Holy Writ, Plutarch, and the Venerable Bede, that at its close the Ancient Britons rose as one man and whacked the invader. But comic relief baffled him. For one thing, it had to be in prose, which he had no talent for; for another, it had to be supplied by rustics, and he had never met any.

One day, he consulted Snipe. Snipe gave him half a dozen vulgar equivalents in thirty seconds and would have warmed to more. But Sir Sagamore had seen a great light: Snipe was told to go out that very afternoon, with a notebook, and return with all the vulgar equivalents he could lay ear to. The result was excellent. From a later excursion Snipe returned with the makings of a sub-plot: it would have been even better, he said, if he could have intervened and told the husband it wasn't the pig who squealed. But for that, he would have needed to put on visibility.

Sir Sagamore looked grave. Fairies, said he, should not intervene in mortal affairs. It was against nature. As for visible intervenings, they not only disregarded the natural order, they flouted it. Nothing could come of such doings but scandal, confusion, public riot and danger, not to mention personal inconvenience. It could only be undertaken – and then with the utmost wariness and discretion – for some undoubtedly high purpose: to turn a blind old man away from a bull, for instance, or to subserve a work of art.

The parish of Biffins St. Salome lay to the east of the Kingdom of Arden. And on the first Sunday afternoon after his admonition by Sir Sagamore, Snipe, in mortal embodiment, was strolling in the churchyard of St. Salome, peering through windows, watching the shadow on the scratch dial,[8] and wondering when the sermon would end – for though he did not know much about the Church of England he knew that sermons eventually end. He did not hear this one end, for by then he was asleep under a yew-tree. The first he knew was that people were filing out of the church porch and then hanging about. Standing in the porch was a fat

redfaced young woman holding a fat redfaced baby. She had two older women with her, both wearing ostentatiously clean aprons. And from within the porch came an icy tenor voice, saying, 'Take the child away. I can do nothing for you.'

'Oh, Parson!' said the three women, speaking as one.

'Take the child away.'

'Oh, Parson, she never meant to go that far,' said one of the women.

'And it can't help being a boy, diddums!' said the girl.

A clergyman now appeared on the threshold. He was lean and pale and his features were contorted in an effort to keep his temper.

'I don't refuse to christen your child because he is a bastard. That is not a canonical obstacle. The obstacle is rubrical. A male infant must have two godfathers. In cases of emergency, one may suffice. This child has none. I cannot, therefore, proceed. Go away.'

'But there's two of us,' said the second woman, humbly.

The clergyman gave up any attempt to keep his temper. He relaxed his features, and looked diabolical. 'Only one of you is required.'

Snipe stepped forward and said he would be a godfather.

Just as he knew that sermons eventually end, he knew that christened children receive a silver mug. He was not going to stand by and see the redfaced baby defrauded.

Ten minutes later, he had renounced the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, and the carnal desires of the flesh; had asserted his steadfast belief in a number of phenomena he knew nothing about, and stated his intention of keeping God's will and commandments and walking in the same all the days of his life. It seemed to him that he had been rather rash. But as his fellow-godparent, who had prompted him in the replies, looked unperturbed, he decided not to fuss. He expected the next question to be if he would give the child a silver mug. It would not find him unprepared. Peering in through the vestry window earlier that afternoon he had seen a silver vessel; it was scarcely a mug, since it had no handle, but he hoped it would do. He was waiting composedly and a shawl had been wrapped round the baby when he heard himself be told point-blank that he must call on it to hear sermons and be brought before a bishop. 'Never!' he exclaimed. His protest was lost in a shuffle of departure. The godmother smiled reassuringly and beckoned him to follow her. 'Excuse me,' said Snipe. 'I won't be a minute.' Tossing off his visibility, he flew into the vestry, snatched up the chalice, wrapped it in a napkin and left by a side door. Demure and visible, he rejoined the christening party, who invited him

to step home with them for a drink. The home-made wine mounted so quickly to his head that he almost forgot the christening present and staggered away while it was still being unwrapped.

* * *

The chalice stood on the table, together with four mugs of parsnip wine and some remains of black-pudding. They dared not keep it; there was no safe way to return it. The midwife undertook to carry it to Master Bartlemy, honest man, who would melt it down, keep mum, and not cheat them inordinately over the proceeds. This she would do on the morrow. With this settled, they turned to its giver. The midwife maintained he was a fairy. She knew it from the moment she clapped eyes on him, and standing at the font she had been all of a tremble in case he got splashed – one drop would have been enough to make him scream like a weasel and vanish. The baby's grandmother said she didn't want to say anything against fairies; but to believe in them was superstitious. The young man was an angel. If he were an angel, countered the midwife, he'd have known better than to steal a chalice, to which the grandmother retorted that if an angel couldn't make free with a chalice, she'd like to know who could. They were both pleasantly tipsy and went on disagreeing without ill-feeling. Meanwhile the girl sat suckling the baby, who after such a christening was bound to grow up into something remarkable.

It was she who first heard the footsteps bearing down on them. In burst the priest, the constable, and both churchwardens. By then the midwife, remembering Abraham's Sarah,[9] was sitting on the chalice. Through a hail of denials, the four men ransacked the hut, and all might have been well if the People's Warden had not also remembered Abraham's Sarah and hauled the midwife to her feet. The chalice tumbled out of her petticoats, the priest swooped on it like a vulture, the three women were bound and dragged away to the lock-up to await their trial for theft and sacrilege. The girl struggled and besought to take the baby with her, and might have got her way, but the priest said no sin had been committed by the infant; it must become a charge on the parish.

* * *

When Snipe recounted his afternoon's work to Sir Sagamore, he did it with misgivings. Not only had he intervened and been seen doing it; he had failed to bring back a single vulgar equivalent. Sir Sagamore

reproached him inattentively and fastened on the word, 'rubrical,' – an unscholarly derivative, he said, of 'rubible.'[10] The rubible had been a fashionable instrument in the past; young persons like Snipe played it, in and out of season. No one played it now, but the name lingered on, and 'a rubrical obstacle' meant a passage of music which could not easily be rendered on a rubible. As a sub-plot has to have incidental music, the parson of a country cure might well play on a rubible: love songs and drinking songs, to show that the cowl does not always make the monk; might even frolic with a girl of the parish – What did Snipe think? Snipe was so helpful that in the next Historical Tragedy the incumbent of Biffin St. Salome was the villain of the sub-plot, and Snipe played him.

He did so well, and made his grin so ghastly, that the Queen demanded he should appear in the next production. It was notoriously risky to thwart the historical Titania. Three times did the Ram, the Crab and the Scorpion shed good influences on Snipe in sub-plots. After the third cycle Sir Sagamore began to think the time had come when Snipe could figure as an Ancient Briton. With this in mind he wrote the History of Merlin Ambrosius, Builder of Stonehenge. Snipe had the title role, and entered riding the white horse.

It was a leap up in the world from polishing it.

He liked to remember the humble origin of his distinction – the afternoon when he became a godfather. He did not talk about it – it was the sort of thing one's parents deplore, one's contemporaries find funny; but later on, when he was eminent enough to have a past and perhaps be Master of the Revels, that impulse to befriend the redfaced baby would be a touching item in his reminiscences. By then, there would be more to tell; he would do better for the baby than renounce the Devil on its behalf and give it a mug without a handle. That was the part of a Church of England godfather; he was also a fairy godfather, a superior variety, of whom more could be expected. When he could find the time. . . And one afternoon in May, he managed to revisit Biffin St. Salome. There was the alehouse, looking much the same. There was the church, also looking much the same except that the graveyard was lumpier. An elderly man was tidying it, slashing bluebells with a sickle. When he straightened up, Snipe knew him. His hair was grey, his features had stiffened into a stone image of exasperation, but he was the youngish man who had glared across the font. Hardened in cruelty, he was now slashing bluebells. Snipe sat in the yew-tree and counted on his fingers. Time, that twirled like a silk thread from a bobbin for Elfins, was a different matter for mortals. Ten years, he reckoned, had made the youngish man an old man.

Ten years would have twirled the redfaced baby beyond recognition. Admitting this, he instantly and passionately rejected it; and flew away considering expedients for tracing the child – a mortal child, turned out by the hundred, whose name he did not remember, whose face he would not recognise; a mortal child, who might already be dead of measles, of colic, of the pestilence.

* * *

The boy sat in the newly-sown field, clacking his bird-scarer and watching the sun. The sun was his task-master. It set him to work with its rising and kept him working till sundown. In winter it grudged him warmth, in the dog-days it parched him. But it was the best master he knew, for it was foreseeable. Today, it smiled on him. He basked in a seldom-known feeling, a feeling of positive happiness. Early that morning he had tripped another boy into the horsepond. On his way to work, as he munched the young green off the hawthorn hedge, he found a thrush's nest with five fledglings in it. Wringing their necks, he had eaten them. They were delicious – beaks, guts, feet, feathers, they were delicious. He had not felt so well-filled for weeks. He wished he had not sucked so many birds' eggs which otherwise might have matured into meat. Come next spring, he would be wiser.

* * *

As Snipe flew on, a thought darted into his mind. The alehouse had looked much the same. He had got many of his vulgar equivalents there, and the alewife, whose squeals were mistaken for a pig's, was a friendly woman. He would enquire about his godchild at the alehouse. He turned back to Biffin St. Salome. In the empty churchyard scent was pouring out of the dying bluebells. He put on visibility, gave himself a shake, and walked to the alehouse. Some men were sitting on the bench outside; he gave them a Good-evening, and sat down at the further end of the bench. The woman came out and was the same woman. When she brought his drink, she lingered, making talk and eyeing his clothes. He told her she did not look a day older since he saw her last – and that was a good ten years ago. A long time, said she, bridling, to remember a poor country woman – or was it the beer? Not beer, said Snipe. Water. He explained how he had seen a boy-baby denied baptism for lack of a godfather and how, since no one else offered and the child's salvation hung on it, he had come forward. Merlin Ambrosius had taught him how to phrase a

speech; he thought he was managing nicely, but was not prepared to be heard with such bursting attention.

'So you were the one they tried to lay the blame on?' exclaimed the alewife. 'The lies some people will tell! Your honour steal a chalice indeed? For that's what they did, the three of them. Stole the church chalice and sat on it. Such a thing to do! It might have brought a thunderbolt down on Biffin St. Salome.'

'What became –'

'Became of the chalice? Parson and the churchwardens and the constable, they fetched it back that same night. And the girl and her mother were hanged, here, on the Green. But Margery Bull, she got off with a whipping, being a midwife, and useful. And all of them swearing their Bible oaths it was you.'

Slightly sickened by this mortal violence, Snipe asked what became of his godson.

'Godson,' said a voice from the other end of the bench. 'Godson, eh? Did you hear that, Master Constable?'

'Heard it from his own lips,' the constable replied. A third voice said, 'And where's he been, all this time? You ask him that, Master Constable.'

'Yes, where have you been all this time – in a manner of speaking, Sir?' said the constable obediently.

Snipe replied that he had been in a foreign country, and asked again what had become of his godson.

'Godson,' they repeated, with guffaws. A voice from the far end of the bench deplored the wickedness of the times.

Snipe turned to the alewife. He saw that she too was hardening against him; but it was a venal hardening, and she said in an undertone, 'Nobody'd think the worse of you, your Honour, if you'd say so. And it's a waste of breath of breath to deny it, for you're like as two peas.'

'Then is he alive?'

This was taken as an admission of paternity, and he was assailed by a clamour of reproachful statistics. Three pence a week to the poor widow who reared such children, expenditure on milk, swaddle, a comb for nits, clothes grown out of, crockery broken, ointment for sores – eight years' expenditure, ordinary and extraordinary; and then the cost of fitting him out – leather breeches, two shirts – and paying twenty one shillings to Master Jelks the farmer for taking him into employment. All this for a parish brat, all this on the parish rates. . .

It was at a point like this that Sir Sagamore would say, 'Mark the aposiopesis.' Snipe marked it. They had gathered round him, waiting

to hear the money clink. He cursed the moment when he had involved himself in that christening. Suddenly the christening put a weapon in his hand. 'And has the boy been brought before a bishop?' he asked. Their jaws dropped. He paid for his drink and walked away, constraining himself to dignity till he was out of sight, where he cast off his visibility and flew for his life, vowing he would never set foot in Biffin St. Salome again.

And yet he would have liked to have worsted them, worsted them more than just stunning them with a bishop and walking away. If, for instance, he had blackmailed their blackmail, shown them the money, said it was theirs on condition of them fetching the boy, seen them bow and scrape, seen them speed off to do his bidding – seen the boy, too. He forgot these ambitions when Sir Sagamore told him in confidence that the Queen intended to put him on her list of Honoured Artists. Snipe must be prepared with a superlative sub-plot for the next Scorpio, for it was for his sub-plots she honoured him. Snipe pouted: he had hoped to be rid of sub-plots – as author, as player. They had disagreeable associations. As an Honoured Artist, he would be allotted a page.

The court just then had an abundance of page material: selected specimens of world Elfinry, so some called them, others referring to them as the Odds and Bobs, The Queen's Aviary or Natives. Snipe said he would prefer a British Native (the possibility of easing his conscience about his godson momentarily flitted through his mind). The choice rested with the Queen, Sir Sagamore replied, adding that all pages are much of a muchness, but that he had found Natives quicker to learn and more respectful. He was pleased to see Snipe doing so well in the world, but felt a duty to keep him from getting too big for his boots. The announcement of the new Honoured Artists would be made next week, when Snipe would see what Her Majesty had allotted him.

Chaperoned by Sir Sagamore, Snipe took his place in the queue of Honoured Artists – towards the tail, but not quite, as there were some musicians, including a very old lutanist, behind him. One by one, timidly, excitedly, the pages attached themselves to their future masters. It seemed to Snipe that all the best ones had gone already. They were a pretty gathering, some waxen, some golden, some ebony black, wearing their national dress or their national nakedness. His turn came, his name was called, he advanced to the foot of the throne and stood bowing while Titania, in her celebrated voice of untiring sweetness, expressed her pleasure in rewarding his distinguished talent by admitting him to page-owning rank.

A small, small-boned boy came forward unsmilingly and stopped beside him. Sir Sagamore shepherded them away, saying when they were

at a safe speaking distance, 'You're lucky, Snipe. One of Her Majesty's Indians. She doesn't spare them to everybody.' And to the boy he said Snipe would be a kind master.

'Where do you come from?' asked Snipe. The boy answered with a rapid three syllables, broken by a dry intake of breath like a cat hissing. 'Mexico,' Sagamore interpreted. 'And what's your name?' The answer was incomprehensible. 'I shall call you Nicko,' said Snipe. It was as if he had thrown a hook into a dark pond: out came the priest's angry voice saying 'Name this child.' The woman beside him had replied 'Nicodemus.' So now he knew whom to enquire for.

Like most people suddenly provided with a servant, Snipe was at a loss what to do with his page. He had no spectacles to mislay, he was by nature tidy and self-sufficient, he preferred to go on his own errands. Formerly he had enjoyed idling, but Nicko made it impossible to be idle. In self-defence, he would read or study a speech, till in self-defence he had to break off and rack his brains for something for the boy to do. Nicko would dart off, do whatever it was, and be back at his elbow again, popping up silent as a Jack in the Box. It had to be granted that he was admirably silent, deft, didn't knock things over. He was good-looking, too, in his orange-tawny way, with small hands and feet, and a colouring between brass and copper. His straight, unshining black hair lay solidly on his brow, his very eyes, melancholy as lead, looked taciturn. When the next play was in rehearsal, he persisted in following Snipe about, till Sir Sagamore gave him a part in it as the Sorcerer's Imp and wrote him a speech. The speech, expressing implacable hatred, was delivered without a slip, without a trace of feeling and with every word distinct.

All this took time. Another Scorpio play was in preparation, the leaves were falling, before Snipe ate his vows and returned to Biffin St. Salome. It had to be a short visit, so he postponed worsting the villagers, and asked a group of children the way to Jelks' Farm, and if a boy called Nicodemus still worked there. He was guided by a little girl to a muddy barton. There she shouted, 'Parish! You're wanted.' A boy ran out of the barton, looking surly and apprehensive. He was scarecrow thin and had a black eye; but he was unmistakeably the child of the fat redfaced girl. 'I'm your godfather,' said Snipe. The boy wiped all expression from his face. Snipe explained why he had come, why he had not come before, how he hoped to come again, and asked how the black eye had been got. The boy mumbled, and with every word Snipe felt more like a Church of England godfather. Only just stopping himself from hoping Nicodemus was a good boy, he produced his presents. The chalice had been disastrous; this time

the presents were assorted to the boy's lot in life: marchpane and sugar-plums, a pair of rabbit-skin mittens, a mouth-organ. The sweetmeats were thrust between dirty skin and dirty jerkin. The rabbit-fur mittens were much too small, but went to join the sweetmeats. The mouth-organ had to be demonstrated: a moment later it was being sawed across the boy's lips. Ee-aw! Ee-aw! The senseless donkey-bray rent the autumn stillness as Snipe flew over the village, accepting the melancholy of a lost illusion.

He had not taken Nicko. The page was hovering about in the dusk, waiting for him. No more lost illusions, he said to himself. I must be careful not to grow fond of Nicko. In fact, he felt no affection for Nicko. If he had not been the Queen's bestowal, Snipe would have got rid of him. He was as devoted as a mosquito: every day he brought propitiating little gifts: a snail-shell, a bunch of violets, a dead butterfly, a pebble. At the end of the week, these were thrown out of the window. Next week, they began again.

Snipe at this time was a suitor to the Lady Ilex. It was a conventionally hopeless suit. In age, in rank, in knowledge of the world, she was immeasurably his superior, but to love her was admitted to be educational. He brought offerings (at times Nicko's violets came in handy); serenaded her, and wrote her poems. Ilex, like Madame de Sévigné,[11] had unpaired eyes. One was blue, one green. He wrote twelve sonnets, six to each eye. None of her suitors had thought of this before (there were many later imitations) and the novelty amused her. It was a brief amusement. By the time he had completed his ten odes (one to each toe, at her suggestion) she yawned in his face, and smote his vanity by advising him to give up heroic roles and return to sub-plots and the rubible. For a while he wooed her with looks of mute despair – and privately went in terror of being found amusing. Nothing came of it and he subsided into the mass of those who had been desperately in love with Lady Ilex. But his education had not been profitless. The twelve sonnets, admired for their ingenuity, were being imitated. To be imitated raises one in the world. Snipe was made secretary to the Birthday Committee. The birthday was the Royal Consort's.

Oberon was a Hermeticist. He studied natural magic, and followed the teaching of Ramon Lull, Doctor Illuminatus.[12] His system of reconciling past, present and future by observing the movements of small fish in a glass bowl led him to philosophical considerations of the Laws of Chance. It was known that he wanted a Lullian Wheel. As the mechanism of the Lullian Wheel is so delicate, perfect specimens were hard to come by, and the Birthday Committee enquired throughout Elfindom without

success. Then a Wheel suddenly came into the mortal market, the property of a gentleman in Northamptonshire, deceased. It had been sold by auction. Negotiations began. The Wheel had been bought by a Justice of the Peace; all he knew of it was that having got it cheap it must be very valuable. Oberon's birthday was imminent; the Committee agreed to the J.P.'s price. Even then, there was a last minute hitch, for the Court Horologer, who was to fetch it, had an attack of rheumatism – and it was the backlash of a bitter winter. While the Committee were discussing and deploring, Snipe volunteered to go. Agreeing among themselves that the young nobody was a careerist, they agreed that he was young, and that the young should be encouraged. He was entrusted with over and above the price of the Wheel, charged to give it a last minute examination and to carry it carefully. He turned his mind to foxskin furs and warm boots.

His furs and his airs were so impressive that he finished the transaction in a shorter time than he had allowed for. On the flight back the force of the north wind blew him a little off course. He realised that he was over Biffin St. Salome. He flew lower, and circled to have a look at it. A group of men stood near the church, stamping and clapping their chests to keep warm. Among them was a seated man who did not move. His legs stuck out in front of him. His back was bowed by the tension of his arms which were pulled forward and held fast. Snipe descended in a prophetic fury. Of course it was his godson! His godson, grown to a big lout, was in the stocks, his disproportionate muscles twitching like independent animals in his thin frame. Another hailstorm slashed out. The stocks faced north, the hailstones hit him in the face; he ducked his head trying to avoid them. It was all that he could move. The onlookers bunched together under the hail, and laughed good-humouredly. He had suffered so long, they had grown attached to him. 'He won't forget today in a hurry,' said one of them. 'No,' said another. 'Nor brag so about that fine godfather.'

They started back when the godfather leaped among them. Snipe had recognised the sheepish constable. 'You there,' he said. 'Let him out at once. As for the rest of you, take yourselves off, or you'll be sorry for it.' The furs, the airs, his bewildering arrival, his astonishing fury, made Snipe formidable. They stumbled away. The constable made to go with them, but was ordered back. He stood shifting from foot to foot, dangling a large key. At a gesture from Snipe, he unlocked the bars of the stocks, and clumsily helped the prisoner to his feet. The prisoner was too benumbed to stay on them, after a couple of steps he collapsed, and grovelled on all fours. 'Aren't you going to thank the gentleman?' enquired the constable.

The onlookers had paused and were watching from a distance. Snipe beckoned up a pair of them, and Nicodemus was carried to the alehouse. The alewife had seen what was happening, and was ready with blankets warming, mulled beer and time-serving sympathy. 'He'll be in a fever before nightfall,' she said knowledgeably. 'It was a silly day to choose. But no one dies of it.'

By now he had seen enough of the world to know she was the kind of bad character that can be trusted. He told her to take care of his godson, gave her three gold pieces and went away, as though he were leaving a bad dream behind him.

Later on, he remembered that as the alewife held the door open for him, a girl, crouched on the threshold, had slunk in between them, and that her face, seen for an instant, was bleak as a Medusa's.

Snipe's intrepidity was much applauded by the Birthday Committee, the more so since it was coupled with humility. Careerist he might be, careerist he was. But not every young commoner who had careered into good society would have been ready to fly into Northamptonshire, and fly back carrying a large parcel – an admission of mediocre birth and a plebian destiny to be serviceable. It was agreed by seven votes to four that after the presentation of the Wheel Snipe should be personally introduced to Oberon, with a few words of commendation. After that, who could say how far he would rise? No one expected him to rise beyond a time-limit, however. It was a characteristic of the date that brilliant young careerists rose like bubbles through stagnant water, exploded on the surface with a slight pop and later reappeared as reliable functionaries, distinguished from normal functionaries by being rather more short-lived.

The Wheel was presented, Snipe was introduced. Oberon was so pleased with the Wheel that one might have thought he was pleased with Snipe. During the music which followed, he slid away to try a few Lullian determinations, and was scarcely seen again till the revelling under the Ram.

During that interval, Snipe had an unprecedented altercation with Sir Sagamore. It was too late, he said, to cancel the existing sub-plot. But there must never be another like it. Mortals should be presented as they were: brutish, savage and grossly idiotic. No more simple shepherds, simple cuckolds: if he wrote the next sub-plot he would speak a prologue recanting his falsifications.

Did he suppose, said Sir Sagamore, addressing him as My poor Snipe, that there was no falsification in Historic Tragedy – that the Ancient Britons were invariably heroic, true to their word, respectful

to virgins, undaunted by dragons? And was he really so swollen-headed as to suppose it mattered a jot what the playwright said? And again he said 'My poor Snipe.' He might have said, 'I told you so,' but he refrained. He did not want to be self-righteous, nor did he want to incriminate himself. He had warned Snipe not to intervene in mortal affairs, still less to be seen intervening; but he had not substantiated his warning, he had laughed at Snipe's stories, and encouraged his magpie talent for snapping up vulgar equivalents. He had forgotten that Snipe was so young. Meanwhile Snipe was declaiming about truth, naked truth – a profitless subject to be discussed between dramatists, whose talent to drape her is what makes them write for the stage – as well discuss how to boil eggs with a hen. This went on till Snipe realised he had forgotten how old Sir Sagamore was, and how thick the wool had grown over his eyes. Sure of his own clear-sightedness, he promised that for the next six months he would have nothing to do with mortals, remain invisible, and stay strictly within the bounds of the Kingdom of Arden. And when Sir Sagamore had a second thought he assented to that, too: as far as possible, he would stay on the ground. One never knows where flying may not land one.

The promise he made to himself was to be strictly solitary.

Walking daily in the forest he watched the irresistible summer obliterate spring, paid daily visits to foxgloves, observed birds, and discovered things ignored by poets: as for instance that brooks change their tune quite as noticeably as cuckoos alter their interval. He had to submit to his page coming with him; but Nicko was less irksome out of doors and the noise of birds and fluttering leaves and gently creaking boughs made his silence less demanding. As summer wore on, the forest became almost songless and the drone of insects took over. Butterflies drifted in swarms, and settled on him if he stood still. He watched them alight, he watched them fly off and settle elsewhere, without feeling any impulse to fly himself. He was not exactly happy, but he was interested in finding so much that interested him.

After the first raw astonishment, he looked with interest at the sleeping pair, his godson and the Medusa girl. She lay on her back, calm and dishevelled, he lay tumbled beside her, half turned, with his head on her breast. Love had swept them far beyond happiness. Young, ugly, coarse-featured, they slept in majesty, as though they were the legendary Adam and Eve. Their feet were dusty. They had trudged the long distance from Biffin St. Salome to shelter their love in a place where they had no right to be.

Absorbed in them, he forgot himself. Without his knowing it, his interest became veneration, became envy: not of the mortal lot but of the mortal capacity to transcend it.

The girl's eyelids quivered. Her eyes opened, she raised her head and stared round suspiciously. Nothing threatened. She fell asleep again. But the sleep was uneasy, unsheltering. She woke with a start, sat up. Dislodged from her breast, he mumbled, 'What's the matter?'

'I don't know. But there's something watching us. I can't see it, but it's there.'

'It's only me,' said Snipe.

The young man jumped up, glaring in the direction of the voice. To reassure them, Snipe made himself visible.

'Get out!'

He was attacked so furiously, such blows and kicks were rained on him, that he could not collect himself enough to disembody. It was a most peculiar sensation. Blows landed on him, he felt them and was unharmed. A hit on the jaw broke an illusory tooth, his mouth filled with extraneous cool blood. A knife whizzed past his ear. He saw it strike and pierce, felt the strong fist deliver a pat, saw his godson stagger backward, and fall. Authentic blood jolted from the narrow wound. The girl tore her petticoat in strips and tried to plug the wound, and the blood jolting from the dying man steeped them and swept them away.

* * *

Oberon had turned from his Lullian Wheel and gone back to the bowl of fish. They were so active that as they circled, diving and rising, they jostled each other, as if they had forgotten their natural gliding contact. Again he saw the same evolution repeated: the general flight from one quarter of the bowl, the flurry to escape, the head-on collisions. The verdict of the Wheel had been ambiguous. His fish were more candid. As though to dot the i of their message, one had risen so vehemently that it leaped clear into the air. He spoke the name of the person – the quite unimportant subject of a passing curiosity – about whom he was consulting. 'Snipe,' he said. A fish leaped into the air.

The bowl was set to the points of the compass. By going in the direction from which the general flight took place he might discover what was so wrong. He told his attendants he wished to walk in the forest unaccompanied, took his pocket compass, and set out. The attendants saw nothing unusual in this: Oberon was given to solitary strolling.

He had walked for about a mile when he heard a voice lamenting – a thick mortal voice, choked with tears; and another voice, recognisably the voice of one of his Queen's Indians, sobbing in childish rage. As he came on them he saw Snipe turn away from the boy he had been beating. Nearby, the body of a mortal young man lay dead among the trampled bracken, and a mortal girl knelt beside it, tearing her hair.

* * *

Oberon sat down on a tree stump and waited for Snipe to notice him. It was a long while before Snipe did so, and then the recognition was indifferent. Oberon began.

'We say we are at the mercy of events. I sometimes wonder if it is not the other way round, and that events are at our mercy, that we wrest them from their course by intervening in them. But the course of events, however much we may deflect or malform it, cannot be turned backward. It finds its way, as water does, and carries us with it. We call this process destiny, and vindicate our passions by our stars. Or we attribute everything to chance, and relieve ourselves from the trouble of vindication. But what is this chance, and what are its laws? – for I am persuaded it has laws: without laws, it would be immobilised, and unable to demonstrate its existence. Perhaps they are impermanent laws, changing in accordance with some hermetic zodiac. Was it by chance, by volition, or by the stars that when I was given the Lullian Wheel which you had fetched on the coldest day of the year (and was it by chance, by volition or the stars you fetched it?) my first experiment was to determine your character? Because you were unknown to me? But my curiosity was free to wander among an infinite number of unknowns – or would seem to be free. This much I can be sure of. Today, when chance again impelled me to consult the Wheel about you, its three concentric circles trembled to rest at such an ambiguity of Cause, Accident, and Effect, that I turned to my unlettered fish for a solution. And to solve the solution, I am here. But that is only one twist in the Gordian knot. You, and these two hapless mortals, are here for equally mysterious reasons. And yet it is exactly *we* who are here. Why us, in particular? By the mercy of events which we have rendered unmerciful? By implanted destiny? By collusion of planets? By lawless chance? What is your opinion, Snipe? How do you account for it?'

'The boy did it,' said Snipe.

'I saved his life. And he beat me.' Nicko burst into a passion of weeping, louder even and more passionate than the girl's.

'You coincide in the truth,' said Oberon. 'And throw no light on it.' He paused, looked at the lines in the palm of his hand, shook his head and continued. 'The laws of chance are mysterious. There is no mystery about the laws of actuality; no subtlety, nothing to engage speculation, nothing to detain us. They are clear as glass and crisp as piecrust. Snipe! You will be charged with breaking the law against fighting or causing an affray in the Royal Forest of Arden. Do you happen to remember the sentence?'

Snipe shook his head.

'Exile.'

The law against fighting and affray was so seldom broken that this alone would have made Snipe's trial remarkable; it was also remarkable because Oberon appeared as sole witness for the prosecution and subsequently as chief witness for the defence. A life-sentence of exile was so terrible that everything possible was urged to get it mitigated: his youthful promise, his position as Honoured Artist, the willingness to oblige which laid him open to mortal exploitation, the very zeal to enhance loud-entertainments which led him to the dangerous study of mankind for his sub-plots, the blossom blasted, the descent to Avernus, the loss to society.

Snipe had pleaded guilty. His junior advocate, privately instructed by Sir Sagamore, used this as grounds for a plea of lessened responsibility, arguing that a man in his right mind would not have pleaded so. There was no hope of acquittal, but the sentence of exile for life was abridged to a term of fifty years, with Catmere as his place of exile. Questioned after his return, he said he had liked listening to the curlews.

An Alien Element

Two advocates of the Scottish bar were discussing a trial over their wine.

A fairy called Logo sat invisibly by the fire and listened.

'So sentence was postponed until tomorrow,' said one. 'But there can be no doubt of it. There were seven accusers, and they were categorical. Let me fill your glass.'

'I speak under correction,' said the elder man. 'But it has been my experience that a score of accusers are more likely to be in error than one. Not that that will affect the upshot.'

'I should hope not. Law is above the people, but it administers the common will. Granting your objection that the testifiers are mistaken, I maintain they are fundamentally in the right for they condemn a criminality. Even if Janet Nicoll did not make their cows die and their children fall into fits, she would have liked to. She bore malice against her neighbours. That is the gravamen of the charge.'

'The malice may be mutual. Do you remember, or was it before your time, the case of Margaret Wallace?[13] The accusers testified, one and all of them, that they had been at the point of death and she had cured them. They could adduce nothing against her except that she worked their cure. One and all swore to it that she was a witch, and should not be let live. For why? Envy. They envied her for her power.'

'How did she work the cures? Sacrificing a cat calling on Satan?'

'By stripping them of their sweaty shirts and holding the shirts in a south-running brook.'

'Of all cock and bull stories,' said the younger man. 'There's no limit to what people will believe. They believe in curses, in masses, in fairies.' Recovering his point, he said, 'But all this nonsense has a putative existence, since the commonality believe it.'

'A belief that makes them live in dread.'

'A belief that enriches their lives by giving them a sense of importance. They would be loth to lose their witches and warlocks.'

'Mistress Nicoll will be loth to lose her life when she's tied to the stake and the rope tightens around her throat.'

'Mistress Nicoll believes in witches herself. She asserts she is one.' How they talk, thought Logo. And drink. That's the third bottle.

They compared unfavourably with the executioner, whom he had visited earlier that evening – a harmless fond fellow who sat with a child on either knee, fending off their buffets and supping mussel broth. Though he too talked of Janet Nicoll, it was not to make her a mounting-block

for intellectual arrogance. 'I shan't get by with it, Meg,' he repeated. 'It wouldn't be in nature for her not to do me a mischief. She'll put a dying curse on me, wither my legs or tie the knot. I'll never be a man for you again, Meg.' He hugged the two children closer to him, saying they would soon be fatherless. His wife sat beside him, plaiting rowan leaves into a belt to wear next his skin, telling him to keep his heart up and thinking privately that she wouldn't make such a to-do about strangling a witch.

Logo was ambitious. He meant to rise in the world and become President of the Givenny Philosophical Society. Every Elfin Court has its distinguishing eminence, largely conditioned by the amplitude of its means: the splendour of Brocéliande, the opulence of Zuy, the licentiousness of Elfhame. Poorer courts cultivate learning. Givenny in the Pentland Hills, Foxcastle in Dumfriesshire, were adjacent enough to be critical of each other's claims to enlightenment. Foxcastle, according to Givenny, was given over to frivolity and mathematics. The Givenny Philosophical Society was a Foxcastle byword for trivial materialism. Logo had been a member of the Society for some time; as a step towards the Presidency he was preparing a thesis to be called Instinct in the Insect and Mortal Worlds. He had completed the first part, a study of the hover-fly, which lays its eggs in living caterpillars. For the second part, he was describing how mortal society, more developed than the caterpillar, gets rid of alien elements implanted in it. Having dealt with Socrates and Jesus, he was studying the contemporary phenomenon of witchcraft. Witches, if not so readily available as hover-flies, were locally prevalent.

He pulled out his notebook. His annoyance at hearing himself dismissed as having only a nominal existence made his hand tremble. He would be the better for a little fresh air. He put back the notebook, opened the casement and flew off to see how Janet Nicoll was getting on.

She was in darkness, and chained to the wall, so he judged; for the whimpering and grizzling came from one quarter. The whimpering and grizzling resembled nothing so much as the noise of a saw being drawn through a knotted piece of wood. He approached the sound, put out his hand, and touched her shoulder. The flesh was swollen and hot as a loaf taken from the oven. Her shriek of pain made him snatch away his hand. He had watched the caterpillar writhing as the young hover-flies sucked their juices, he should have watched the sufferings of an alien element in process of extirpation – indeed, he had sat through much of her trial; but an unscientific squeamishness had kept him from watching her being professionally tortured, satisfying his conscience with the knowledge that there was no lack of mortal documentation to fill up his thesis.

The whimpering and grizzling began again – unchanged, unending, maddening. If he were not to be driven mad he must put a stop to it. Standing at a cautious distance, he said, 'Janet.'

'O my Satan, my kind Satan! You have come.'

The fervour in her voice embarrassed him. He spoke reassuringly, told her that death was a general amends, that he would be with her to the last, wished her goodnight, and went away.

This time he walked, trying to interest himself in the few people still about. Their voices had an adventitious geniality, ringing out in the frosty air. Windows were still lit in the upper stories of the tall houses, where the gentry had their lodgings, and smoke-wreaths trailed over the roof-tops, flattened by the east wind. He was jaded by his researches, and thought wistfully of Givenny; but tomorrow the sentence would be pronounced, and carried out on the morning after. Having committed himself to a study of the extirpation of this alien element, he must see the process completed. So he would stay in Edinburgh.

He supposed they would still be at it.

They were still at it, advanced by another bottle. Their faces were redder, their voices louder, their utterance more clouded. They were talking about second-sight, and whether it should be admitted as evidence in a court of law. The elder man told a long rambling story about a feud in Glen Clova, where a second-sighted man foresaw a bloody ambush. His directions were imprecise, so while the attacking party had taken another route, the enemy stormed the castle and killed the young heir and all the household.

'So what do you make of that.'

'Snap my fingers at it,' replied the other. 'S'all of a piece with relics and fairies.'

The elder man was affronted. He got up to go.

'Here, finish your glass.'

As he was gone, his host finished it for him, and fell asleep. Logo came gently behind him and removed his wig. Presently the sleeper noticed something amiss, clapped his hand to his head, found it denuded. 'Must have fallen off,' he said solemnly. 'Shouldn't fall off. Not wholesome. Must look for it.' As whatever is held by a fairy partakes of the fairy's invisibility, naturally he looked in vain. 'Wife!' he bellowed. A thin woman in a night-rail came in. 'Your damned cat has stolen my wig.'

'Why should she do that?'

'To have her kittens in.'

'But she's not in kit.'

'Of course she's in kit. Why else should she have stolen my wig?' I'll hang it on the town cross, thought Logo, to avenge the insult to Elfin and exonerate the cat. He made up the fire and settled himself for sleep in the Advocate's padded chair. In his dream he entered a crowded street, carrying the wig and looking for the town cross. Wherever he turned, a stake started up before him. By now the wig was as hot as though it had come out of the oven. He woke with every detail of the plan exploding in his mind. Once they had hold of her, she would be invisible. Because of her mortal avoirdupois, it would need three, better, four to carry her. The four must wait, with sharpened knives and sharp-edged flint elf-bolts, till she was brought to the stake, and bound to it, and the rope laid round her neck. Only then would they go into action. The executioner, poor wretch, in dread of what he must perform, would let go of the rope at the first flint, the first draw-blood scratch. The bonds would be cut, the rope pulled over her head, she would be seized, lifted, vanished away in front of the gogging eyes of the onlookers. So much for the unbelievers!

He jumped up, shook out his crumples, flexed his wings. There was not a minute to spare, but he must replenish himself before he set out. He stood on the landing and snuffed. His keen sense of smell directed him to the larder, where he ate the greater part of a game pie. Leaving the larder, he met the cat, replenished her with what was left of it and was off for Givenny, only pausing to deposit the wig in the Greyfriars churchyard. By then there was a grey glimmer in the air.

Back at Givenny, he bathed, breakfasted, and swore three fellow-members of the Philosophical Society to secrecy. It was not so easy as he expected to persuade them to his plan. They were all for rescuing Mistress Nicoll, but raised difficulties as to what to do with her afterwards. Did Logo seriously propose to instal a mortal in Givenny? She would be out of place, out of proportion; as for keeping her as a specimen, one can carry research too far. Was it not rather heartless to sever her from her friends and relations? And where was she to be put? One could not have her straying all over the Palace, weaving spells and frightening the ladies. Besides, she was a Christian, since she felt so warmly toward Satan. Every Elfin knows what Christians are like. They would willingly help him to abduct her, but after that she must be Logo's responsibility. It was sundown before anything was settled. There was a further delay while they equipped themselves with flasks and fur-lined boots. Only at the last moment was it found that no one had remembered to sharpen the knives.

But they were in time. It was a bitingly cold morning, the execution had attracted only a small attendance. A faint jeer was raised when Janet

Nicoll came in sight, accompanied by the executioner, four jailors and a bailiff. There was an unexpected hitch when the executioner refused to carry out his duties, knocking down one of the jailors and blacking the bailiff's eye before his scruples were overcome. Then everything went according to plan. Fumbling and blubbering, the executioner bound the witch to the stake, and arranged the noose round her neck. The bonds were seen to snap, the noose to slacken. A hail of flints whizzed through the air, Janet Nicoll disappeared piecemeal, one kicking leg the last that was seen of her. Every one fell on the executioner, saying he was in league with the witch and that beheading would be too good for him.

It was an arduous journey, not so much because of her weight as because of the difficulty of synchronising their wing beats and maintaining a joint direction. Flying was practiced by many of the younger set at Givenny as an outdoor sport. Logo had chosen his assistants from among Givenny's most enthusiastic flyers; but they flew as athletes, they had no experience of flying as a team of pack-horse animals. From time to time he glanced at the witch to see if she resented being so jolted. She seemed to be asleep. Her mouth was open in a beatific grin. Lowering her with care, they stopped for a halfway rest.

She sat up briskly and looked about her. 'This isn't the place,' she said. Logo explained that they would soon be there. 'Then why are we dawdling? I shall be late.'

When the fairy called Nig muttered about ingratitude, Logo bade him remember what she had been through.

In the triumph of getting her away he had not really considered what to do with her next. Plainly, she was in no fit state for the formalities of introduction: she was over-excited and, even for a mortal, regrettably bulky. He must, not so much introduce as insinuate her, later on when she could withstand the glare of publicity and her hair had been combed. Till then, she must be secreted, comfortably, of course, in some sizeable nook. He directed that they should enter the Palace by the back door, and that she must on no account be dropped till he had decided where to drop her.

Nig, Parta and Flory were sinking under their burden and the burden was growing restive when Logo came back, saying he had found the ideal nook for Mistress Nicoll. It was a disused wash-house, light and airy, which the Vice-President, Sir Gossamer, had fitted up for his experiments on tension and resonance in the timpani. It had a sofa, three drums, some sheepskin and a Pythagorean Bob; and it was warm, as it adjoined the kitchen (which was why in pursuit of quiet, he had

abandoned it). Mistress Nicoll was carried there, and set down on the sofa. Her bearers resumed their visibility, bowed, and smiled.

'You needn't think I don't know what you are,' she said. 'You're fairies.'

It struck them as a rather slighting acknowledgement.

When they had brought her food, blankets and a bottle of home-made mead, they went away, locking her in as a precaution against any one disturbing her.

In the middle of the night Givenny was wakened by a succession of horrible howls. Lap-dogs barked, children screamed, members of the court gathered in the passages, ringing their silver hand-bells and commanding the working fairies to find out where the howls came from and put a stop to them. The working fairies were still objecting when the howls broke off. Into the silence rose an alarum of drums that swelled and solidified into a wall of sound. Raising his voice to a shout, Logo begged the Queen's permission to explain. She listened with interest, applauded his vindication of Elfin validity, sent her bower-woman for comfrey ointment (sovereign for muscular strains), and commanded him to take her to Mistress Nicoll. He obeyed, marvelling at this juxtaposition of their dishabilles – a proximity he could never have foreseen – and the easy relationship which dishabille imposed. He unlocked the wash-house door. Mistress Nicoll was bounding from drum to drum, thwacking them with the empty mead bottle. She dropped the bottle. The drums throbbed into silence. 'I believe we have met before,' said the Queen – a traditional formula, never known to fail.

Queen Petronella was young, energetic, and passionately bored. In her craving for action she had tried to foment a war with Foxcastle, alleging depredation by the Foxcastle herd of wild goats, demanding satisfaction, and finally sending her Consort with a gauntlet of challenge. Unfortunately, nothing came of it. The gauntlet was dropped in a skirmish with the herd and a billy-goat had eaten it. She could see a hundred uses for a resident witch.

For instance, there was her private war with the horse-radish. A plot of horse-radish had colonised the figtree border, sending its roots deep into the soil, spreading into a thick, squat jungle of rusty green leaves. Ordered to root it up, the gardeners said this would be waste of labour and demanded extra pay. Things were at this pass, with the Queen, the gardeners and the horse-radish steadfastly holding their ground, when Mistress Nicoll was transferred from the old wash-house to the Blue Bedroom. There, next morning, the Queen visited her to ask if she had slept well. The bed was too short, said the witch, otherwise there was nothing to complain of. The bed should be lengthened immediately,

said the Queen; she was a light sleeper herself, she could sympathise. 'Do tell me,' she continued in a sisterly tone, 'I'm sure you know a great deal about mandrakes.' Mistress Nicoll gave a non-committal grunt. The Queen explained that there was a troublesome growth of mandrakes near the figtree, which the gardeners refuse to dig up. Mistress Nicoll nodded as though this did not surprise her. The Givenny Philosophical Society, continued the Queen, would dig like pigs un-ringed if they could be persuaded it was mandrakes; but insisted it was horse-radish. Now, if Mistress Nicoll chanced to come by when they were gathered there, and exclaimed 'What a quantity of mandrakes,' her expert's word would convince them. And if she would throw in something about the need for thorough digging, since mandrakes must be lifted all of a piece if they are to scream, mutilated mandrakes merely grizzling on and on – but of course Mistress Nicoll knew all that backward.

When the Philosophical Society, summoned to attend the Queen in the kitchen-garden, were grouped round the horse-radish, Mistress Nicoll happened to stroll by, stopped as if thunderstruck and exclaimed at the profusion of mandrakes. Adding some hints on mandrake cultivation, she demonstrated the screams of mandrakes with both legs adhering against the whimpering of mutilated specimens. Sir Gossamer was the first to recover, identifying the compass of both examples as the interval of an augmented fourth; the *mi contra fa* known among musicologists as the Devil's Interval. He was about to add that the term was purely professional when he saw that Mistress Nicoll and the Queen were already walking away. Relieved from considerations of tact, he announced his newly-conceived project: to ascertain if the *mi contra fa* of a mandrake's scream could be corrected by applying the Pythagorean device of shortening its legs at a calculated nodal point. His inventive fire kindled members of the Society to see other uses for the mandrake. Flory suggested that mutilated specimens, if toned down, could be installed in nurseries, replacing lullabies. If reinforced by a portevoix[14] and fixed on a swivel, said the President, they would indicate the direction of the wind, with the advantage that one wouldn't have to go out of doors to consult them, as with weathercocks. Others, again, thought they would deter mice.

It was agreed that mutilated mandrakes would be the more profitable subjects for research.

Logo, seeing Mistress Nicoll and the Queen walk off arm in arm reflected that she was doing well for herself, and really no longer his responsibility. He would be glad to wash his hands of her. Her imitation of the mutilated mandrake had chilled his blood; it was identical with the whimpering and grizzling he had heard in the darkness of her prison. So

to mimic the voice of her own suffering and terror was, to say the least of it, in bad taste. Nig, standing beside him, said, 'I wonder what those two will be up to next.' It was Nig who had commented on her ingratitude, Nig, who refusing to consider her sufferings, had unswervingly disliked her, Nig who speculated on what her mortal grossness might not involve them in. This steady drench of disapproval fortified Logo's conviction that the rescue of Mistress Nicoll was justified, was the only thing he could have done, was, in the last resort, a rational seizure of what he needed for his thesis on Instinct in the Insect and Mortal Worlds.

The excavation was a hit and miss success. Some diggers definitely heard screams, though fainter than they expected. Others, more numerous because there was a greater demand for mutilated mandrakes, heard unmistakeable whimperings. The broken ground was rolled and hoed into a fine tilth and parsnips sown in it. The parsnips came up, the horse-radish came up among the parsnips. This passed unnoticed, except by the gardeners. The only sufferer was the figtree.

It was early in March – a taxing time of year when every scandal has been told threadbare and every vegetable is at its worst – when Mistress Nicoll arrived. She might have been tolerated as another of the Queen's activities if she had not been put in the Blue Chamber and made such a pet of. Court opinion expressed itself by treating her as though she were a bad smell that no well-mannered person would admit to being aware of. Logo could not breach this ostracism (he was within an inch of being ostracised himself) but he did what he could for his importee by mentioning that the poor creature had been under sentence of death as a witch. Public opinion sharpened: no sensible fairy believed in witchcraft, any more than in the devil. As Mistress Nicoll could not have bewitched the Queen, it must be by some mysteriously disgraceful means that the Queen was influenced by Mistress Nicoll. But one by one the younger ladies, out of pure devotion to their Sovereign, drifted from the austere ranks of the ostracisers, followed by their admirers, out of pure devotion to the ladies, and set up a Queen's party, which was lively, laughing, elegant, and danced all night. Since there was no such thing as witchcraft, it embraced Mistress Nicoll; so refreshingly absurd, and so obliging with her herbal face-washes and spells. A few middle-aged fairies seceded – one does not want to be classed as prematurely prudish; the remainder of the Court – the dowagers, most of the male fairies, all the functionaries, stiffened their opposition. It was felt there should be an official opposition. It was decided that in the interests of symmetry it should be called the Royal Consort's Party.

The Royal Consort alone had expressed no opinion about Mistress Nicoll. He was not much interested in fairies, not in the least interested in mortals. He was a naturalist, and lived for the smaller mammals. On the first of April he found himself irresistibly drawn to the Queen's saloon. After a polite how-d'you-do to the Queen, he flung his attentions on Mistress Nicoll. He kissed her hand, he knelt at her feet, he rummaged in her petticoats, he called her his mouse and his snowy-throated weasel, he promised her nuts, new-laid birds' eggs, and baby rabbits if she would yield to his flame. If he had compared her to one of the larger quadrupeds it would have been more compatible with their relative proportions. But he was too overwhelmed by passion for these niceties. Rumours of this situation had spread through the palace. The Royal Consort's party hurried to rescue him from the hag. They found him making ardent attempts at rape and the hag steadily repelling them, commenting 'Poor wee laddie'. At midnight he stumbled to his senses, sneezed violently, asked for a glass of water, made his adieux to the assembly and went off to bed. By daybreak the functionaries' valets were sent out to pick vervain and dill, known to hinder witches of their will. The functionaries had been needlessly alarmed; Mistress Nicoll was busy curing cases of frost-bite.

She could cure any ailment; take iron-mould out of linen; expel worms from children. Her liniment drove out Sir Gossamer's lumbago; her love-philtres enlivened court life during the long wait for Spring; in May she took no less than five swarms of wild bees. She was always ready to help, saying 'Leave it to me,' to those who consulted her. Since the results were so satisfactory it was thought better not to enquire how they were brought about. The Philosophical Society had a high opinion of her native acumen, the elder ladies took her elixir vitae (twelve drops in fresh dew) every morning. 'You must admit,' said Logo to Nig, 'she does a great deal more good than harm. Think how she calmed the Queen down with those waxen images.'

It was notorious that when Taurus was the ruling zodiacal sign, Queen Petronella was at her most belligerent. In mid-May she had resolved to teach Foxcastle, once and for all, to respect Givenny's boundaries. The statement of torts and injuries had been drawn up, cannon polished, volunteers selected, the Royal Consort named Commander of her army; Givenny was trembling on the brink of hostilities when Mistress Nicoll persuaded her to try the more efficient and economical method of shaping waxen images of the foe, sticking them with pins, and setting them to melt before the fire. As the images weakened, the pins dropped out, the ranks of the enemy wasted into an anonymous puddle of candlegrease,

the Queen tasted the joys of victory, and the satisfaction of art. Peace was proclaimed, and her grateful subjects thankfully subscribed to a memorial obelisk culminating in a candelabra.

'You can't deny that she saved us from fighting with Foxcastle,' Logo urged. 'And I don't suppose Foxcastle is any the worse for it, either.'

'And Mistress Nicoll that much the better. My dear Logo, pull your wits together. The woman isn't interested in doing harm or doing good. She is interested in power.'

It was useless to combat Nig's prejudice. Logo turned the conversation and presently they were discussing the Vice-president's scheme for ripening cucumbers in ant-heaps, and laughing about his moral championship of salads. But the words, 'she is interested in power' sank into his mind and found assent there – an oblique assent. Whether or not Mistress Nicoll aimed at power, she possessed a power-like quality, which only manifested itself by its absence. From time to time, she had fits of brooding, or sulking, or deep inertia, when she looked on without seeing, was deaf to what was going on, dangled her large hands in idleness, breathed like a sleep-walker. After a while, she would rise, walk heavily away, and be gone for hours. During these absences, Givenny was at a loose end, purposeless, directionless, unmotivated – as if some powerful engine had been turned off. When she came back, her usual reliable, obliging self, action would engage with action, purposes, needs, appetites, resume. And since nobody commented on these withdrawals, it was probable that every one felt them, and did not wish to admit it.

Comment was ready enough when her efficiency failed: if a spell miscarried, or a love philtre directed a gallant to another lady, or an insect bite swelled to a blain. The windless damp heat that came soon after midsummer brought a plague of midges and flesh-flies; troops of ants filed into the kitchen quarters. It was remarked that the ants were dimensioned to the mortal world. They had never been anything else, but the working fairies exclaimed at it as a portent. Some said that Mistress Nicoll brought them back with her after her unaccountable absences; others, that she went off on purpose to collect them. Mistress Nicoll had never been well-received by the working fairies; she had an unfortunate way of addressing them, and they resented being sent to gather weeds from hedges and ditches. It was also thought very sinister that she made her own bed.

By mid-August the unstirring heat, the low, shapeless skies, were a common-place, too oppressive even to be complained of. Sweat trickled into Logo's eyes and spattered the page as he sat revising his thesis. The end was in sight, nothing remained but some pleasurable amplifications,

when he realised that there was a serious omission. He had proved compellingly that witchcraft was a mortal superstition, one among the many he had listed, but he had left one superstition unmentioned: the superstition cherished by the witches themselves. Fortunately, Mistress Nicoll was still available. He hurried to seek her out, and questioned her about Satan – what did he look like? Did he, for instance, wear horns? She stared at him with a blank face, and pretended not to understand. Even when he reminded her how he had snatched her from the stake, he could get nothing out of her. Pained by her ingratitude, he relied on common report, horned Satan, and made him black as soot.

The Philosophical Society held its meetings in the Rotunda, a pavilion in the grounds, built in the Gothic style, with a thatch roof. In spite of the heat there was a large attendance to hear Logo read his thesis (by then it was known he was to receive the Society's medal). Queen Petronella was there, all the Court Functionaries, and many of the ladies. All the ladies carried fans. After a speech by the President, Logo stood up, bowed in appropriate directions, and began. He was not conscious of feeling nervous, but as he finished the first section (Instinct in the Insect World) and set out on Instinct in the Mortal World, he became aware that the manuscript rustled, as though his hands were trembling. He grasped it more firmly, and glanced at a lady in the front row, supposing that the vehemence of her fanning might be the cause. Her fan was motionless, concealing a yawn. He could see nothing to account for this stir of air; but the manuscript rustled on, louder and louder. It was so long since there had been a current of air that it was not till the pages twitched in his hand that he realised he was in a violent draught, that a wind had risen, that the open casements were clattering on their stays, that a door had banged, that the ladies were holding down their skirts, that dead leaves were whirling about the room, that it was growing dark, that it was suddenly and icily cold. The pages of his thesis were wrenched from his hold and whirled among the dead leaves; an instant later, the wind seized on the thatch roof, tore it clean off, swept it away; the dead leaves and the pages of his thesis were sucked up in its wake and disappeared. Above the steady howl of the wind he heard the Queen's voice cry, 'Splendid!' She did not make a move, so no one else could. They sat on, listening to the wind, and growing colder and colder. When she got up to go, they rose, so numbed and stupefied that only the sturdiest fairies could accompany her. The rest staggered about, trying to stamp some feeling into their frozen feet, collided, tripped over the benches, toppled to the ground. Clinging to each other, they made their way through the wind to the palace.

The Pursuit and the End

Sir Verdigris, a minor functionary at the Elfin Court of Brocéliande, was an eminently respectable fairy – tactful in his amours, moderate in his opinions, obliging without ostentation. Servants, commending him, said he was always the same. If it occurred to his equals to commend him, they said, 'Good old Verdigris, he never changes.' As time went on, his contours changed considerably, but since he never varied the colour of his suits only his tailor noticed it.

Respectability, if consistently practised, is not arresting. After Sir Verdigris quitted the Court of Brocéliande it was mainly the withdrawal of a particular shade of puce that people were aware of. But before he became a shade he was subjected to several enquiries as to his motive for leaving. At first, he said rheumatism – due, he alleged, to the prevailing damp and sunlessness of the surrounding forest. Later, his loyalty discountenancing aspersions on the native climate of his Sovereign, he explained that he wished to meditate on mortality. Ageing mortals retire from the world on the pretext of 'making their souls;' Elfins, being soulless, knew better; but mortality is common to everything that lives, though Elfins last longer, being made of superior substance. Then why, they asked him, retire? Surely he could meditate on mortality just as well at Brocéliande, and enjoy Court amenities at the same time.

'I wish to be free to give my whole mind to my own mortality,' he replied. They could only conclude that his health was failing, and turned the subject.

What he really wanted was to give his whole mind to eating snails.

It had become the latest fashion at Court to be traditional. Minuets were danced to small bagpipes; menhirs were planted at the end of avenues; no banquet was complete without a regional dish, and to make sure of its authenticity cooks were fetched from the provinces. Sir Verdigris complied, but with private reservations; it seemed to him immodest to eat tripe. One evening his reservations were overthrown. As one can be swept into love by the tilt of a voice saying, 'Do you take sugar?' or the flutter of a lilac ribbon, Sir Verdigris was overcome by a smell. Like love, it made a new man of him; suave, compelling, permeating, it exhaled from a silver platter laid in front of him, and from similar platters laid in front of the other banqueters. Each platter, flanked by a narrow fork and a small paper mitre, contained half a dozen snails in their shells, hot from the oven and immersed in a melted butter flavoured with herbs and finely chopped garlic. As though the technique

were inborn in him, with his left hand he clasped a shell with the mitre and with the fork in his right hand lifted the snail from its habitat to his mouth. The flesh was dark, like a truffle; but tougher and infinitely richer. He realised with a pang that there were now only five snails left. Glancing along the table, he saw that some of the banqueters had eaten a snail or two and laid down their forks. Others were working their way impassively, as though in duty bound. Only Lady Aude, an elderly fairy of splendid lineage, had finished her half-dozen and was eyeing his five. Resolutely, he ate on; and then, again as to the manner born, sucked up the remaining butter from the shells.

Six mouthfuls of paradise. A pious memory. Snails were not served again.

Sir Verdigris made it a matter of principle never to confide. But principles melt in the furnace of longing, and after a day or two he found it possible to ask his valet, after a cough or two, whether those traditional snails went out of season, like pheasants, and when they would be in season again. It was their cook, the valet explained, who had gone: offended that so many of his snails had returned cold and uneaten, and that snails had not been ordered again, he had gone back to his province in a huff. Hearing Sir Verdigris groan, he respectfully rubbed salt into the wound by remarking there was no accounting for tastes. The snails had been very popular belowstairs.

It was this which decided Sir Verdigris to shake the dust of Brocéliande off his feet. For a while, he intended to shake off the valet too. But calmer considerations prevailed. It was carrying knight-errantry too far to adventure into an unknown world without some one to negotiate its perils and inconveniences, to see about lodgings and laundresses, trim his toenails, fend off mortals (working fairies are more accustomed to mortals) and sew on his buttons. He decided to travel in a litter, with the valet to look after him, and a groom to look after the mules; and completed his entourage – for he felt he might need some female company – with a tortoiseshell cat, called Babette.

Looking back, he saw the Forest of Brocéliande like an earthbound cloud. Mist steamed up from it, glittered in the rays of the morning sun, vanished in the calm blue sky. He could scarcely believe he had lived his life within those confines, he could scarcely believe he had left them.

Babette slept beside him, coiled round herself, almost like a snail . . . a favourable omen. On his other side, in a strong catskin bag, were his life-savings. He had never been a spending man; the savings amounted to a substantial sum. Now his economies and moderations could expand in

whatever extravagances the quest for snails might involve, though – not being a romantic – he would study the rate of exchange before converting his fairy gold into specie, and try every mortal coin with his teeth. As never before, he realised the advantages of Elfinry. Mortals can only get out of their difficulties by death or wedlock. If by some contretemps his fairy gold turned into withered leaves while he was still there to be reproached, he could put on invisibility. If footpads attacked his litter, he could fly, Babette in one hand, the catskin bag in the other, and sit in a tree. The valet and the groom could fly to some other tree. Whether or no the mules could become invisible, he did not know. It did not matter. Two ambling mules conveying an empty litter would soon amble their way into the repertory of Breton legend.

He himself, indeed, was part-way into that repertory. Breton legend was full of characters in search of something or other: a buried treasure, a magic trivet, a chapel in a wood. His single-minded quest for a dish of cooked snails was more positive, though how and where it would end was for the moment visionary. One thing he could be sure of. The dish of snails would not be buried, or in a wood. It was strictly a social phenomenon: members of society cooked it, ate it; however distant the province it hailed from, it would not waste its smell on the desert air. An unconsidered possibility pricked his mind. 'Stop!' he cried. The mules came to a standstill; the valet asked what he wanted. 'Stop if you see any gipsies.'

By sundown the next day he had eaten five dozen snails in garlic butter.

It had been a shock to discover that the object of his pilgrimage was a commonplace in the mortal world, and remarkably cheap. But Venus (he had read as much Lucretius as he cared to) is a universal nourisher. The cheapness of this particular nourishment – Venus seeing to it that snails abound and that a single clove of garlic renews the world's stock by a twelve-fold reproduction of itself – proved her kind intentions. His first aristocratic reaction that snails and garlic should not be at every consumer's beck and call subsided into philanthropy: mortals have not much to enjoy; he was glad they had snails.

What remained astonishing was that they were almost as unappreciative as the banqueters at Brocéliande, preferring beef and carrots, hashed mutton, or eels. As for Babette, though she rejected snails she licked up all the butter his tenderness could spare her; and as in some wayside inns the butter was rancid, she did quite well.

She was an affectionate little cat, and mainly very biddable, galloping lopsidedly to his call when she had been let out for a stroll among

the bushes. She was no trouble to feed. Venus, fruitful in fledgelings and baby rabbits, saw to her requirements. Suddenly she became a changed cat, yowling and clawing his thighs. One evening she disappeared. In the morning she returned, looking smug. The groom made a coarse comment. Sir Verdigris had to accept the probability that the groom was right. Venus had seen to another of Babette's requirements.

Venus abounding was all very well, but he did not want to travel with kittens sprawling all over him. Yet the approved method of drowning them in a bucket seemed crude; he must look about for a convent that cared for foundlings. For the present, the quest for the ideal snails would be coupled with finding some quiet hostelry where Babette could lie in. They journeyed on. Babette broadened. However quiet the hostelry, it might be suspicious of fairy gold, so the catskin bag put on weight after transactions with a money-changer in a cathedral city had bulked it out with mortal coinage – dulled, greasy pieces which only a sense of duty enabled Sir Verdigris to bite.

They travelled southward (the valet remembering that the cook whose slighted talents had carried him back to his native province had spoken of a soup peculiar to Corrèze and poorly imitated in Lot) and came into a region whose tumbled dry-stone walls seemed to promise snails, and whose contours unequivocally rebuffed travellers. The mules were either labouring uphill or bracing their forelegs against steep declines, and whatever merit the local snails might have had was lost in the local custom of having them stewed. Sir Verdigris became increasingly testy with his attendants; they expressed their feelings by condoling with the mules. It was not till they had got into a calmer landscape that a platter of snails as they should be restored his faith in his mission. They were not very good, and the garlic was chopped too coarsely; but they were good enough to be critical about.

Two days later, hunting by nose as poodles hunt truffles, he was arrested by a smell as imperative as the notorious Last Trump. It came from a down-at-heels thatched inn in a forest clearing. The snails were everything their smell proclaimed. If Lady Aude had been sitting opposite him, she would have done more than eye them; she would have leaned across the imperfectly scrubbed wooden table and snatched them like a harpy. He finished his second dozen in beatific tranquillity, and as the melted butter passed into his being he realised that this was the place where Babette must await maternity. The monotonous thunder of a waterfall came from somewhere near by; the noise was soothing and answered the problem of how to dispose of superfluous kittens.

When the woman of the house came to his table he asked if the snails were cooked by her. She nodded. She looked cowed and sullen and seemingly was deaf – though this might be because of the noise of water always in her ears. He announced that he would stay for a few days, maybe a week. The bedroom she showed him to was small, dirty and full of flies. There was a stoup of placid holy water above the bed, a chair, three pegs on the wall. Nowhere in his journey had he been so ill-accommodated; not since the revelation at Brocéliande had he tasted such snails. He dismissed her, saying it would do very well.

Babette must have slept better than he, for her morning appearance put his to shame. Wherever the valet had slept, he had not woken in time to shave and dress his master. Now he looked as aggrieved as only an old servant can. He asked when they would be leaving. Sir Verdigris replied, 'We are staying,' and added that a laundress must be found immediately.

It was not how he had meant to begin the day.

The day, however, had begun. After the incessant nocturnal uproar of frogs, cicadas, and nightingales, the silence was intimidating. It occurred to him that even with snails and clean linen time might be heavy on his hands without some stopgap diversion. The surrounding forest was dense and uninviting, and he could not be forever going to look at the river. Running with monotonous force and swiftness between level banks, it plunged, smooth as steel, into a resounding cavernous pool far below, and foamed onward under dripping trees. Once acknowledged as forceful and noisy, it would always be the same. A happy thought struck him: for his stopgap diversion, he would write sonnets. In his youth, sonnets were expected of a young man, though later they went out of fashion and were considered monotonous. But the monotony of a sonnet is a controlled monotony; it stops at the end of the fourteenth line. So far, he had used his silver-point pencil to record expenses in his travel diary. Allowing a page to a sonnet, there were still plenty of blank pages, and the expenses could be noted in the margin. *Solitude*. *Brood*. *Rude*. *Intrude*. After breakfasting, he would write a sonnet to Solitude. Breakfast – radishes and singed bread – laid the foundations of the sestet with *Quiet* and *Diet*. He had found a tolerable bank in the shade and was admiring the completed sonnet when the smell of garlic called him in to his mid-day fulfilment.

Even in this temple of the snail in perfection there were no other worshippers. A gang of woodcutters came in for wine and black pudding. At the further end of the room the valet and the groom were glumly supping fish soup, and submitting to the pleasantries of a half-wit. These

seemed to be a customary part of the entertainment, for they were received with guffaws at the woodcutters' table and ignored by the woman of the house. Between her stupefied listening face and his, so complacently vacant, there was enough resemblance for Sir Verdigris to conclude they were mother and son.

It was not till two nights later that more company came in. The first was a dwarfish hairy fellow, who capered up to the son of the house, tweaked a pork chop from his hand, took a bite out of it, and handed it back. This was done with such familiarity that one might have supposed them brother idiots, if the newcomer's step had not been so agile, his sunburned face so deeply incised with wrinkles of mockery. 'What next I should like to know,' commented the valet. His disapproval fell on deaf ears. Every one was looking towards the door which stood open on a moonlit dusk, and listening to the heavy squelching footsteps that approached it. The doorway was blocked, the moonlight blotted out, by the enormous bulk of the man who entered. A length of fishing twine was looped round his wrist, a large pike, alive and writhing, dangled from his hand. Massive, bull-necked, heavy-shouldered, he stood in the doorway, collecting attention. Then, gripping the pike with both hands, he wrenched its head off. The woman of the house came forward, curtseying. He threw the headless body on the floor and signed to her with a gesture of largesse to pick it up. She bundled it, still writhing convulsively, in her apron, and said, 'What does Monsieur de Draq desire this evening?'

'Snails,' he said, his glance scything Sir Verdigris' platter.

She carried off the pike to her kitchen, and came back wearing a clean apron. A table was brought forward, placed in the middle of the room, and furnished with a setting for one. The man wiped his bloody hands on the tablecloth and sat down to wait for his snails.

When she had brought them, she hovered at Sir Verdigris' table. He told her to bring whatever fruit she had. Sickened by that business with the pike, he had lost his appetite and longed only for a taste with no life-blood in it. After a pause, during which the large man had another platter of snails, he was brought some wood strawberries. He ate them slowly, determined to outstay the large man, and trying not to look at him. Whenever he did so, the man seemed to have grown larger, sitting humped over his platter with the enormous red hands which had wrenched off the pike's head daintily extricating snail after snail. When at last he went out, lackeyed by his hairy companion and followed to the door by the curtseying woman of the house, Sir Verdigris went to bed, exhausted by hatred.

Too exhausted to sleep, he tossed about, rehearsing snubs that would cut the monster down to size, should he reappear next evening. 'Monsieur le Draq? A provincial family, I suppose. I do not remember hearing the title, but no doubt such families abound in the remoter provinces.' In the pit of night he realised, with some relief, that nothing bound him to such an encounter. He could go elsewhere, only waiting for his clean linen.

In the silent morning it seemed to him that this was a practical decision. He would depart, find snails as superlative elsewhere, and not have to pay for them with a dirty bedroom and low company. No doubt the excellence of the snails was regional, a trick of local cookery, the use of some local herb. One place was as good as another for Babette's lying-in, and his valet would be pleased. The valet tempered his pleasure by making difficulties; he doubted if there would be any clean linen. 'But I saw the woman only yesterday,' exclaimed Sir Verdigris, 'thumping the dirt out of a sheet at the river's edge'. The valet replied that she had been drowned that same evening: reaching for a washing-bat that was floating away, she lost her balance, and fell in.

'And my shirts?'

Reassured by hearing that she had drowned before beginning on the shirts, he said that another laundress must be found. All country women washed by nature, just as by nature none of them could fold.

He compared his lot with Babette's, who could lick herself clean and enjoy the process. At the moment, she was not looking her best. Something must have discomposed her, for her hackle bristled and her tail was bottle-brushed. Rubbing briefly against his legs, she began to follow some other animal's track, snuffing the ground and twitching the tip of her tail. He felt slighted by her inattention; but it was a charming morning; and his last, which enhanced its charm.

The valet must have said they were leaving, for during breakfast the woman of the house brought a bill to his table. It was a moderate bill, though she had rooked him over the fodder for the mules. Paying it, he said he had only once eaten better-cooked snails. Civility was wasted on her. She looked at him with her deafened expression as though he had struck her a blow. He ordered his last platter of snails for the mid-day meal. Between now and then he would write a farewell sonnet and incur some expenses to enter in the margin.

The sonnet was shaping in his mind when he was distracted by the appearance of two women – his new laundresses, no doubt, for the valet, shirts in hand, was hounding them towards the river. They approached it

clinging to each other, stood tottering, screamed, and ran away. Apparently he was doomed to distraction and worldly cares, for a couple of lines later the groom stood bowing before him, saying that speak he must. 'What's wrong with them?' said Sir Verdigris, thinking of the mules. The groom repeated that speak he must, adding that he had lain awake all night sweating like a baker. Not that he had not guessed it from the moment they arrived, the place so outlandish, and everyone in it out of their wits. But he had kept his premonitions to himself, till last night.

'Did your Honour notice the two who came in – the great hulking one and the hairy one? They've no right to be above ground; they don't belong, they are left over from times past, neither mortals nor honest Elfins. It's only in a back of beyond place like this they still hang on. The hairy one is what's called a Lutin – all mischief and trickery. I asked the boy who he was so thick with – you'd need to be a half-wit to take up with such a creature. But the other one, that took more asking. I had to promise not to say a word to anyone before I got it out of him. He's neither more or less than a draq, a water-ogre. Once he gets his hands on you, you've no more chance than that pike he tore up. And he owns this place; walks in whenever he pleases, never pays a penny. That's why they call him Monsieur. And that's the long and short of it, your Honour. I felt it my duty to speak out, for when I think of the danger we're in, my blood runs cold.'

Sir Verdigris, clutching the silver-point pencil as though it were a stiletto, said mildly that now the groom had spoken out he could go. He spoke mildly because any word of rebuke would have prolonged the man's invention, and his own invention was clamouring for silence to expand in.

The phrase 'they are left over from times past' had darted through his inattention, and pinned him to a theme. A sonnet would not do; he would have to find an ampler form – a Pastoral, or an Eclogue. A Pastoral would be best, modelled in a classic style and concluding with an apotheosis of Dando the Cosmographer. Dando had been Archivist to the Court of Brocéliande, bowed with age and learning when Sir Verdigris was a brisk middle-age; it was at Dando's funeral, which had been so unexpectedly grand, with people coming from all over Elfindom to speak panegyrics, that he had realised the value of a literary career. Later, when Dando had been put on the Index and everyone praised him, he had read the Cosmography – not exhaustively but for long enough to be able to talk about it and have an opinion as to whether or no Dando was justified in putting so much reliance on legend and popular beliefs. Dando had made a great deal of the tradition of those beings left over from the past:

beings who had not quite reached the status of Elfins, and referred to in alehouses and in cow byres as the Old Ones. The Old Ones – it might be the subtitle of his Pastoral. The Old Ones . . . beneficent characters, or at least harmless, a little saddened by exile from better days, but still frequenting their old haunts.

He opened his travel diary on a clean page and began to make notes. Moonlight. Glades. Any particular trees? Venerated by the peasantry. Fond of cows, milk-drinking. Druids? Inspirations, problems to overcome, similes and adjectives thronged into his mind. Should he introduce himself into the poem, fall asleep and see it all in a vision or remain classically anonymous and apart? This decided, and the opening lines secured – would it perhaps be better to call it a Masque of the Ancients? – nothing would remain but to write it.

He was so absorbed that he forgot it was time for the mid-day meal till the want-wit was sent out to tell him his snails were ready. Abstractedly consuming them he remembered that this was to be his departing meal. Snails might be as good elsewhere, but snails were not all. He could not uproot his Pastoral from its native soil till a little more had come of it; composition was impossible in a litter, and the Genius Loci must be respected. He told the woman of the house that he had changed his mind and would stay a few days longer. Apart from the Genius Loci, this would allow his shirts time to dry. The shirts would appease the valet; as for the groom, he had supplied the theme for the Pastoral, and another night in terror wouldn't kill him.

With all this nicely disposed of, Sir Verdigris went back to his grassy bank, brushed away a few ants, and composed part of the apotheosis to Dando the Cosmographer.

As it happened, the groom rolled his eyes to no purpose. No one came in that evening. This was rather a disappointment to Sir Verdigris, who had wanted to have another look at the pair who had no right to be above ground. Sponsors, in a sense, of his Pastoral, they might have something to contribute to it. It was even conceivable he might find room for a chastened Lutin. The Water Ogre was out of the question, of course: there is no poetry in violence. During the night, he dreamed a great deal more of his Pastoral, into which some She-Ancients had intruded themselves. He had not intended to get involved with the feminine gender: a disturbing element, even when modified by a perspective of immemorial time. On the other hand, Pastorals have to have shepherdesses. He could dedicate them to their flocks, quiet flocks reposing in the shade, feeding in the glades. Or their busy-body femininity could be employed in finding stray cows and driving them back to the mortal owners – which would

cover that item of beneficence which so far he had not found an opening for. It was astonishing how everything fitted itself in, found its answer in something else, echoing rhymes blossoming just where they were needed, problems dissolving like lumps of sugar in camomile tea. By the time he sat down on his grassy bank the She-Ancients were just what he wanted. 'You are my wand,' he said to the silver-point pencil. 'I have only to wave you . . .'

Laying down when he had got his male and female Ancients into two groups, to sing antiphonally – no, not sing: chant – their evening hymn to Somnus, he saw that his last lines were dimming on the page. His feet were cold, his legs stiff with long sitting, the prospect of snails never more compelling. But their smell hadn't yet enlivened the air, so he thought he would take a stroll. He had neglected the forest; he would make it amends. As he entered it, he heard a rustle of leaves, and saw Babette come flitting towards him. She rubbed against his legs in a welcoming way; no doubt she was well acquainted with the forest, unawed by its brooding density, immune to its midges. She would have her kittens here. 'Babette, when are you going to have those kittens?' She pounced into a heap of dead leaves, scattered them, chased after them, circled round him and frolicked deeper into the forest, pausing to look back at him as though she would lure him after her. He eyed the brambles and would not be lured. Turning away he called her to follow him.

'Babette! Babette!' She had vanished among the trees.

Having done his duty by the forest, he would now stroll down to have a look at the river. He was almost there when he heard her feet pattering on the dry turf. She raced past him, smooth as a shadow, and stood pirouetting on the river's brim. A cat can look after herself. But remembering the laundress, he ran after her. His hand sunk into her soft fur. An instant later, she was in the water, pitiably diminished, struggling and spluttering. He leant over the brim and seized her by the scruff. Frantic with terror, she drove her claws into his wrist. The river laid hold on him, bowed him, hauled him in. Sir Verdigris, Babette, a brief stain of blood, went over the waterfall.

'Snipe': Dorset History Centre reference D/TWA/A70 (S/UR/24), Dorset County Museum reference STW 2012.125.3917; 'The Alien Element': DHC reference D/TWA/A32 (P/front right/21/2a), DCM reference STW 2012.125.1063; 'The Pursuit and the End': DHC reference D/TWA/A32 (P/front right/21/1a), DCM reference STW 2012.125.1062

Notes

1 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Letters*, ed. William Maxwell (Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 296.
2 Warner and Ackland Archive, Dorset History Centre reference D/TWA/A70 (S/UR/24).
3 Susanna Pinney, 'Sylvia, a Memoir'. *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 18, no. 1 (2018), p. 7; email to Peter Swaab, 21 July 2025.
4 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Hamlet in England', *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 21, no. 1 (2021), p. 36: the 'Indian Boy sat in a corner clasping a marmoset'.
5 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 375.
6 Warner, *Letters*, ed. Maxwell, p. 289; to Mavis Gallant, 1 August 1976; 'an old monkey delights nobody'.
7 Email to Peter Swaab, 22 July 2025.
8 'Scratch dial': a type of medieval sundial, also known as a Mass dial, marked with the times of canonical services.
9 See Genesis 31: 34–5. Here Warner seems to have confused Abraham's wife Sarah with Jacob's wife Rachel. When Jacob secretly stole away from Laban's house Rachel took some of the household goods with her: 'Now Rachel had taken the images, and put them in the camel's furniture, and sat upon them. And Laban searched all the tent, but found them not.' Thanks to Jan Montefiore for her familiarity with the Book of Genesis.
10 'Rubible': a kind of fiddle or lute.
11 Madame de Sévigné (1626–96), French writer best known for her letters.
12 Ramon Llull (1232–1312), Spanish philosopher and theologian.
13 Margaret Wallace was tried for witchcraft and executed by strangling and burning in 1622.
14 'Portevoix': a funnel-shaped device used to amplify a person's voice.

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