

## The Forest Man

### **The Forest Man**

The first thing you noticed was his voice. It was remarkably gentle, always quiet. However you had been feeling before, it took you somewhere beyond. You found yourself breathing more slowly. It made his very presence disarming. Nevertheless, it was typical that, long after we knew his name, we chose not to use it. It was not our way to bestow easy acceptance, so we called him 'the forest man'.

Our village had always been restless. Some said the sheer geography brought dissatisfaction: a valley trapped between featureless, overbearing hills. Those who came were infected with disquiet. Those who left struggled to find peace elsewhere. We who were native were never really at ease.

He came to occupy a small cottage standing on its own, slightly to the east and higher than the other homes. It was built into the hillside, so that the kitchen at the rear of the ground floor had no daylight. It would have been very damp. Within weeks he began to grow vegetables in the thin soil that clung to the rock, which puzzled those of us who had tried and failed.

It's strange how rarely you question the place where you were born, especially when, in every aspect, it is remote. You are imbued with its character, its outlook, its shortcomings. Surely there were reasons why the people of our village had come to be as they were? No doubt in past centuries religion had compressed our ancestors into caution and fear, and like the austere landscape forbade them to hope for abundance. Now only an elderly pastor remained, but restraint and unease had trickled down through generations, and endured long after their sources were hidden.

And it was rare that anyone would arrive with the intention to stay. Even the shortest journey would involve a morning's travel by horse. Or a day by foot. And with what incentive? A place where grudges lasting generations had evolved from

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small acts of meanness in the past. A community held together by only the needs of survival.

But he arrived with a hopeful face. We knew old Helios had left what remained of his portion to someone, but had no idea who that could be, and doubted if they would want such a legacy anyway. Clearly we were wrong, but imagination precedes reality and is rarely able to shape it as it would hope. We didn't like each other but we liked outsiders less.

And so we were inclined to think him a fool, although we knew nothing about him. But by coming here he had exerted his will, and that was enough to prick our resentment: we who had abandoned ourselves to our circumstances.

We waited greedily for signs of inadequacy, for the inevitable struggle to thrive, the shearing of hope into despondency. But no signs emerged. We could see him repairing the roof and guttering, and cutting the pinched trees to construct a shelter for his patch of crops from the eroding wind. At first he came regularly to the store to buy provisions, but was soon snaring the rabbits that eluded us, trapping fish in a tapering net, and harvesting the produce of his garden.

In early summer he was joined by a wife and child. Both were beautiful. Against our will we found ourselves mesmerised by the child's innocence. She looked at us with a trust against which we had little defence.

Neither could we ignore her father's strength of body and character. He was tall, powerfully lean, and moved with intention, and his certainty began to reveal itself in small ways. A timid river ran past the village, leading to a wood in the valley beyond. We saw him setting off with his horse, carrying a treadle, returning in the evening with spindles turned from green timber. His house would be well furnished.

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It was then that we wondered if he had been a forester, and found an excuse to neglect his name.

Then one day he brought a large pannier to the village store. It contained cabbages, turnips and carrots.

‘More than we can eat,’ he said, as we stood around. ‘Best let the old folk have it.’

His offer caused confusion. We were used to bartering and bickering. No-one shared more than they had to. We were lost for a response.

So we felt unable to refuse, but we protected ourselves with suspicion. What could he want of us? Was he trying to prove himself better than those who had found virtue in parsimony and self-sufficiency?

But a further uneasiness crept over us as we struggled to maintain such thoughts. No-one could deny that he was both frugal and capable of his own upkeep. Wasn't his unexpected gift proof of this? And, whenever we were in his presence, the gentleness in his voice disarmed even the most guarded.

So we began to fumble with a new curiosity, and to wonder grudgingly was there something we should admit to ourselves? After a full season he had barely impinged on our day-to-day existence. He was courteous but asked for nothing, and with his family seemed able to live without us, if such was to be the condition of his life.

It was Trevelik who first went to visit him. An outsider himself, in fact an outsider amongst outsiders, he had always displayed an independent mind, or at least a belligerent non-conformity. As blacksmith and wheelwright combined, ultimately he controlled our ability to travel for those things we could not provide ourselves, and

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so could allow himself freedom to remain unswayed by any argument that failed to please him.

So word passed that Trevellik had climbed the hill, then stood briefly on his doorstep, before entering. He had stayed for more than an hour, and when he emerged the little girl had danced beside him until he reached the path leading back.

In the week that followed, the stranger – he would always be a stranger – took his horse to Trevellik's forge, then left with it yoked to a borrowed cart. He returned at dusk with three trunks of ash and one of yew, with branches trimmed and the bark left on. The following day he joined Trevellik at the saw pit and they drank cold tea together as they worked, then ale at the end of the day. It was the first time Trevellik had been known to let a man stand above him, taking turns with the double-handed saw, ripping the timber into planks, one atop and the other below. Within a month Trevellik had built him a sturdy cart in exchange for six chairs with turned legs and finials.

Trevellik was not a man to question, but this transaction was noticed and drew further comment: the village whispered uneasily, and rumour grew. It was said that the two men had been witnessed sitting together with hands clasped and heads bowed, as though in prayer. Trevellik's status allowed him to choose to absent himself from chapel, and he exercised that choice more often than not. Again we were perplexed: he was hardly a type to bend to the whims of another. Perhaps, like him, others began to be tempted to climb the hill. I myself felt a pull that was more than curiosity, but disclosed it to no-one.

So we watched and waited, but not for long. The pastor was a son and grandson of the chapel and, perceiving threat to his standing, now clung to the

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authority of his forbears. The following Sunday evening he stood by his sparse altar and addressed us.

‘Children of this parish,’ he said, ‘word has come to me of one who makes seats more elaborate than those on which you worship, and another who favours a stranger over the people whose ancestry lies in this valley and the hills from which it is formed. We, who were born here of fathers who were born here, have lived our lives with the virtues of restraint and simplicity, and these qualities have sustained us. Our homes are plain, as is the food that nourishes us. We have remained strong because of this. We have not succumbed to the pride of needless decoration, and neither do we welcome it now.’

‘Furthermore, I have heard of ungodly practices: a man of our own soil being tempted to follow another path, of heads bent in forms of worship other than our own. The truth of our Saviour resides in this chapel, and cannot be found elsewhere. I ask you to remind yourselves of this in the face of any malign persuasion you encounter.’

Now, so many years later, I think of that sermon as the catalyst; both the text itself and what followed. Looking back, some believed he had drawn down the anger of God, others that his words proved that the only god is providence.

It could be said that, in many senses, the hills surrounding us ruled our lives. The effect of their height and steepness on either side of the valley was always apparent. We were often left in shade, and missed much of the variation brought by sun, wind and rain. But we were also protected from exposure to the extremes that befall open land. I suppose, because of this, they created an expectation of predictability. They were dour and excluding but constant. As far as it was known, the landscape had been stable long beyond living memory.

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So there was no forewarning. We expected the storm to pass, as others had. The river might swell, but wouldn't flood. No roof would be opened by a gale. We took to our beds in the early darkness, expecting to wake to an unchanged world.

Instead we were roused long before morning by all the noise of hell. Our homes shuddered as the earth beneath us vibrated and groaned, and crockery shattered as it fell to the floor. Children cried out and animals wailed in terror. Then silence, or at least only the hum of the storm high above. Perhaps it could be expected that, collectively, our first instinct was to huddle and survive. In the immediate aftermath I heard no doors opening, and no footfall moving towards the source of the disturbance. Like others, I'm sure, I lay trying to interpret what those violent sounds, so suddenly in abeyance, could mean. And then it happened again, and this time everyone came out in dread to see what it was we faced.

By day the chapel was apparent from almost anywhere in the village. Now we were led only by the cacophonies that had come from that direction, walking in fear of what we would find, our faces white, our shadows distorting in the light of the lamps we carried, able to see only a few feet before us.

When we reached it no part of the elderly building was standing. The nave, sanctuary and rectory, all backing onto the hill, were now engulfed and flattened by gravel and stone. For the effect of its impact the avalanche might as well have fallen straight from the sky.

It was not possible to imagine anyone alive, or to know if this marked the end of the night's danger, but we hung our lamps and ran for shovels, and dug until long after daylight, sifting the earth that we knew must now be a grave.

We found the forest man first, a spade in his fractured hand. Unlike us he had shown no hesitation: he must have responded immediately to the first sign of danger.

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We lifted his body, now flaccid with all the bones broken, and set it gently on the ground. His wife pressed her face into his earth-stained shirt and wept in a manner we had never witnessed, while one of the village women took their child away to her home. Hours later we uncovered the pastor, dead on his mattress, recognisable only by the birthmark on his forehead. Trevellik set out trestles by his forge, and we improvised a stretcher and carried the bodies there.

With Trevellik I spent the evening preparing them for burial. It fell to me to cleanse and dress both men, and restore what dignity I could to their crushed frames. As I did so I found it impossible not to reflect that two such contrasting lives had met an identical end. Three or four coffins always stood ready at the back of Trevellik's workshop, and once I had done all I could, he and I lifted the sack-like corpses into them, covering them over in plain linen, before he nailed on the lids. They stood overnight in his parlour, and in the morning eight of us bore them on our shoulders to the steep hillside cemetery

The midmorning sun shone directly onto us as the burial took place. Perhaps others, like me, felt a new appreciation for the quiet, warm daylight. Without discussion, no other clergyman had been brought in from outside to oversee the funeral. In the pastor's absence it seemed obvious to turn to Trevellik. Not for his religiosity – far from that in this instance – but because in these circumstances his independence set him apart. And because, by his actions, he had befriended the living while we could only honour the dead.

Standing in the rooted way he had, he read a short homily as the community gathered round the open rectangles of earth. It was not a text we recognised and made no reference to a god, but no-one would question that now. And then, after pausing in silence for a full minute, he addressed us:

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‘We who have been spared,’ he said, ‘are left to reflect on the life and character of those who have not. It is for others, who knew him better, to pay full tribute to the pastor. He never married, and so the tradition of his father and forefathers ends with his passing. He is the last of a line of diligent men, who acted in accordance with their faith.’

‘Thomas, or ‘the forest man’ as you would have it, I did come to know, first in work, then meditation, then friendship. My thoughts are that, had he lived, he could have taught us much, and I trust that, in death, we may come to understand his purpose in living amongst us.’

‘But I hope we have learned beyond doubt from the dark events that have befallen us, that rock which is hard and unyielding will not ultimately be held together by flimsy soil. A structure endures when it is bonded by mortar.’

Trevellik then looked around, making eye contact with each of us, before lowering his eyes, and the mourners dispersed. I stayed with him to fill the graves, and without discussion we dropped the soil gently on the two men, as though to avoid a re-enactment of their fate.

Trevellik first supported then married the wife of the forest man, and became a tender father to his child. He continued to work at his forge, but spent every other hour with them in their home on the hillside. It was noticed that, whenever he spoke thereafter, his voice was newly and increasingly gentle. The chapel was never rebuilt, and slowly, as its absence grew in time, peace, and a measure of kindness, settled amongst us.