

From the Far Side of Twilight

By Simon Waltho

Hush, now, my child, and listen to your grandmother.

You know that I have many stories.

I have stories for bright spring mornings; I have stories for warm summer days; and I have stories for misty autumn evenings.

But *this* is a story for cold winter nights, when the storms drum their grey fingers on the windowpanes and the spiders shiver in their webs as you shiver now, snug as you may seem between your sheets.

This story is a warning.

Was a time - before that of the grandmother who was old when I was a girl, and before her grandmother's too - when village and Valley were young.

Princes ruled in Caerfyrddin, and kings in Caer Wynt. But in village, in Valley, amidst forests carpeted with anemone, bluebell and celandine, beneath poetry-haunted stones, above barrow and hollow and cave, from the far side of twilight, others held dominion.

Fair they were, fair and fey, and many names men gave them.

Fair they were, to the eyes of men; fair as fox-fur must seem to the eyes of the hare.

And men of village and Valley learned to tread lightly in the dry places of the forest, where they tramped their circles down to dance. To hurry along at night, on paths straight and true, heedless of pretty whispers and entreaties to wander. To sleep in unquiet beds, milk at the door to please, iron above it to ward.

And now and then, when these things were forgotten, men did not come home.

Came a time when the kings in the East sought to cast their rule over farther shores. They sent men to village and Valley from lands beyond, who felled yew, and oak, and ash, planted serried ranks of pine and built warehouses for timber in the dry places of the forest.

Who cracked the poetry-haunted stones with dynamite and drove bright steel railways through them; who yoked the sun above the Valley to the skies of Llundain.

Who cut into barrow with picks of iron, tunnelled into hollow and cave, sent men and machines deep into the earth for coal and ore, that ran in a rust and black torrent down the railways and over the sea to lands that lie under foreign stars.

Who bent and broke the land to their will, and so took dominion over it.

And men found they had no longer to tread lightly in the dry places of the forest, men heard no more the pretty whispers and entreaties to wander, men slept quiet and content in their beds. And in the shadow and shelter of the mighty viaduct that spanned the Valley, men worked the mine, and prospered.

It was a happy time.

The mine was an uncaring mistress, but she was not cruel. She may take a man piece by piece, as she did with my grandfather: a knuckle bitten off by a pick-blow first, his leg in a rockfall years later, his life in the explosion that followed. She may take a man entire, in time, as she did when the black coal-dust choked *your* grandfather in his old age.

Yet she took men in honest toil, not in sport. Her price could be hard, but there was honesty in what she returned for it.

In the end, though, what ore and coal remained was judged too deep to be worth the digging. The gates of the mine were shut, the pit head rusted, the viaduct crumbled away to two lonely pillars of brick. Anemone, bluebell and celandine carpeted the rotting concrete

And the young people of village and Valley found they had no work to tire them for their beds in the evening, nor to call them to wakefulness in the dawn.

And so they grew restless.

And with grape and grain, with pill, with powder, with poppy, the young people sought their escape.

On the far side of twilight, *they* had waited.

Now, through cracks in broken windows, through cracks in ruined walls, through cracks in men's minds and men's hearts, they gazed with covetous eyes on what had once been theirs, and might again.

And through grape and grain, through pill, through powder, through poppy, they found their path to return.

The young people of village and Valley began to hear pretty whispers as they lay abed by day in their intoxicated slumbers. At night they began to slip away to dance in the ruins of the warehouses that the men from the East had built in the dry places of the forest long before.

The grandmother who was old when I was a girl told stories to me that her grandmother had told to her.

Of those who returned from a single night in the forest to find an age had passed in the world of men.

Of those who returned from a single night in the forest with something empty in their eyes, and their hearts, and their minds.

Of how, oftentimes, *what* returned was not *who* had set out.

The young people of village and Valley grew pale and slow and mute. Bright spring mornings, warm summer days, misty autumn evenings held no joy for them; all that was left to them was the night, and the dance.

The men, who came from Cardiff to take your mother from her council flat littered with foil and syringes to the hospital where she stares dumbly at padded walls, said it was the heroin that had hollowed her body, her mind, her soul.

The police, when they dragged your father's sallow alcoholic carcass from the river, said it was the booze in his blood that had robbed him of the strength to struggle to shore.

But we knew better.

They take men not in honest toil, but in sport. Their price is hard, and there is no honesty in what they return for it.

And village and Valley are theirs once more.

So you learn, my child, and learn well. To tread lightly through the ruined warehouses in the dry places of the forest, where they tramp down their circles to dance. To hurry along at night, on paths straight and true, heedless of pretty whispers and entreaties to wander. To leave milk at the door to please, and iron above it to ward.

Heed my words, and come safely home.

Sleep now, well as you can.

I'll leave a light on.