

Gerald Killingworth read English at Cambridge and was an English teacher for many years, including four very sunny years in Athens where he also spoke one line in a film and recorded a song.

He is now a full-time writer of (mostly fantasy) novels for adults and children as well as completing a PhD on the notorious Elizabethan writer Robert Greene. The folk music and folklore of the British Isles are a particular love of Gerald's and he is an enthusiastic morris dancer and folk singer, but still very much a shy novice on the tin whistle.

Gerald enjoys learning languages and numbers Irish, Modern Greek and Portuguese amongst those in which he is partially proficient.

# *Hy Brazil*

*Gerald Killingworth*

## *The Elven Wars trilogy*

**Book One**

‘A vivid, unusual and intelligent fantasy in a style reminiscent of *Cloud Atlas*, supporting many elements of genuine folklore in a fascinating, well-characterised, historical mix. Gerald Killingworth writes about the fairyland of Hy Brazil as if he’d actually been there.’

Herbie Brennan, bestselling author of *The Faerie Wars* series

‘From the chance-driven, incalculable Elizabethan world of Walter Raleigh and Edmund Spenser, in an Ireland promising fabulous realms beyond barely-imagined horizons, Gerald Killingworth has fashioned an engrossing fictional universe that Shakespeare would call ‘fantastical’ and I loved every moment of my voyage across it.’

Jonathan Keates, prizewinning biographer and novelist, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature

‘If you like fantasy and history, *Hy Brazil* will transport you to a world which is rich, strange and bewitching.’

Sue Limb, author of the best-selling *Jess Jordan* series and *Gloomsbury*, a comic series for Radio 4

‘It is an intensely well-crafted literary novel, deeply felt, with incredibly persuasive evocations of time and place.’

Michael Bracewell, novelist and Turner Prize judge

‘the best high fantasy story I have read to date...ever. I absolutely loved this story. If you like epic fantasy, this is a must read.’

Andrew Baker, reviewer at <http://FanboysAnonymous.com/>

I shall not begin my tale with the words *My Master*. Master Edmund Spenser has the glory of my enterprise, but I have the full knowledge of it and the hatred of the Elvenfolk everlasting. No, I myself, Edward Harry, am the only begetter and so *I* shall be the first word of all in the telling.

### PROLOGUE

I was born I know not when; where and from what parents no soul has ever thought fit to inform me. My age and even my name are quite my own invention, one plucked from an almanac and the other from the annals of kings. I am inordinately proud of both and would defend both stoutly.

My earliest recollection is of the ancient dame who had charge of me and whom I called grandmother out of convenience rather than truth. ‘You were left in my care,’ was all she would ever say in response to my enquiries and, since she appeared to take this care as a solemn trust, I ceased to bother her with questions soon after I was six or seven.

We inhabited a modest cottage in a village a few miles from Peterborough. I have, since those days, seen the palaces of the mighty and so I am able to judge of luxury and extravagance. For warmth and a general sense of tranquillity, this building at a lane’s end could set itself against any of these splendours, but I knew I was destined to leave it as soon as ever I could. We always had good sheets, they were the envy of our neighbours, and I never had to complain of a scarcity of food on the table. There was beef or fish whenever we had a mind to eat them and I developed a notion that if I questioned their origin too fiercely we should soon dine on cabbage stalks or, at best, gruel. So I held my peace and ate my fill.

The question of my name remained unanswered until well after I was old enough to roam the fields far beyond our village. Grandmother called me 'Child' and then 'Boy', but I did not find this grand enough for the conversations I had when I met villagers or travellers in my roamings. It belittled me to answer 'Boy' when I had spent a companionable hour in someone's company and he ruffled my hair and sent me on my way. I had too strong a sense of my own worth to accept such vagueness.

'I wish to have a name of my very own, grandmother, and to be christened in the church,' I asserted, handing her the collection of sheep's wool, plantain leaves and bird feathers I had gathered by way of a bribe.

'And what might that name be?' she replied making three separate piles of my offerings. I felt that I had chosen the gifts well and pleased her so I moved a step forwards and set my hands on my hips.

'I want a name that will bring me respect. It is not to be a name that men laugh at.'

I had heard the villagers call her 'Granny Windmill', but I suspected they drew this name from the mound at the back of our cottage where a stock mill had stood until a quarter of a century before. I rejected all country names; I was no John Blacksmith or Peter Thatcher.

'What name would you like?' she asked me as if my demand had been the most natural in the world.

'What was our last great king's name?'

'King Harry, but you are rising above yourself if you think I shall have you christened with his name in church. What think you of John Windmill?'

'I will not have it!' I stormed, seizing the edge of the table and bouncing it so that all her feathers took flight.

'What *will* you have?' She picked the beads of dung from the sheep's wool as if my rage had never burst out at her.

‘Give me the name of another king.’

‘Edward. He was a boy when he died.’

‘You shall call me Edward then. *I shall live to be very old.*’

‘Will you?’

‘I shall. You will see.’

‘Edward Windmill, then.’

‘Edward Harry!’

‘Edward Harry, then, if the parson will have it.’

He did have it and so, on Midsummer’s Day, I was given a proper name of my very own. I announced it to the whole village whether they inquired or no. It rang proudly from my lips and I never grew tired of giving it voice or scratching it on any surface that would take a mark. I decided that my baptisimal day should be my birthday too and, with the two sets of half-hearted godparents the parson found for me, I felt that I had advanced in importance in a way that the world could not fail to notice and bow to.

From this time that I bore a name which marked me out from all others, the parson began to take my education in hand. I was called to his house and made to correct all the eccentricities of reading and writing that my grandmother had impressed upon me. She was by no means a foolish woman and I knew that when she fingered her way through our prayer book at least half of what she recited was actually there on the page before her and not her own invention. What was invented, the parson swiftly whipped out of me. My sharpness was a constant amazement to him and a lesson that had begun with the lash often ended with an apple or a sweetmeat. His plan, and mine, was that I should be made ready for the King’s Grammar School in Peterborough. He, no doubt, imagined that I would make an usher in such a school myself, an industrious, sensible fellow grateful for his escape from Windmill Lane. My own ambitions over-topped his ten-fold I should think. I had often stood beside The Great North

Road which ran two miles or so beyond our home. I was forbidden to do this because of the stream of human scurviness and knavery which flowed north and south along the road, but I watched disobediently from the hedgerow and thought my *One day* thoughts, of the day when I should set foot on the road and march towards the glories that I knew awaited me.

I duly learnt my declensions and a suitable measure of humility and was soon thought fit to be enrolled at the Grammar School. Money was always to be found for my clothing and shoes from a source that my grandmother and I never discussed although we spent many an evening by the light of a taper talking over my experiences at school and the families of my schoolfellows. On holidays or at the time of the city horse fair I always had a few coins to jingle and squander and more than once another boy was moved to conjecture that I must be the Devil's whelp or the bastard issue of a gentleman with a conscience. As a matter of course I thrashed those who spoke of me in this way, not because I felt the offence, but because it gave me the excuse to practise those fighting skills I was sure would be as necessary as my Latin. I studied hard and was respected, although I made no close friendships. Boys were alarmed that I would turn with equal ferocity on one who considered me an ally for some trivial slight as I would on those older rascals who sought to make the school their own little kingdom. They were not to know, as I never told them, that all such exercises of my brawn were no more than that, mere flexing of the sinews against some day when greatness would hang on a string before me and I should seize it. I progressed through the school without a swagger. I avoided unfairness and, at times, defended the puny. Master and scholar alike found me a strange fish, an oddity who grew tall and strong and who could construe a hexameter better than the best of them. The parson regarded me as his creation, although I knew in my heart that I myself had created all I was. He enjoyed my company at his table and gave me some of his papers to manage. It was thus that I began to gain some notion of *The World*, that great vanity whose empire began where the small fields of our village ended and The Great North Road beckoned.

As I have said, my grandmother and I never talked of the source of our income, I would not call it wealth, but we shared the knowledge of where small stores of it were hidden about the cottage. There were three or four coins here and there, behind a brick near the fireplace, in a small pouch in the thatch, 'In case that day ever comes,' as grandmother said. What that day was neither of us troubled to put into words. For her it was, perhaps, that dark day when our benefactor, or the Devil himself, closed his coffers to us. For me it was clearly the day when my restlessness got the better of me and a cottage at the end of a lane could contain me no longer.

When I was sixteen, or in what I had chosen to call my sixteenth year, my grandmother began to decline in health. Her last months ran side by side with my last year of school imparting a taste of sadness to our lives although neither of us stumbled under the burden of what we knew would happen soon. There was money for possets and potions to lessen the sharp pains which beset her from time to time and I was usually within call. The parson took it upon himself to try to ease her with a vision of myself first at the university and then, suitably drably garbed, in his own place in the village pulpit. His words certainly eased her but only in providing the one cause for mirth as she died. She knew that if I were ever close to a pulpit with any regularity then I was surely being denounced from it.

'You have done very well,' she said to me. 'But has any day of your life given you pleasure?'

'Pleasure is in the future, grandmother,' I said confident that this was the truth. 'I have been preparing myself.'

This was the nearest I ever came to sharing my heart with her.

'Promise me you have not lost your reason with all that Latin,' was all she said.

'I will certainly promise you that but do not ask me to promise any other thing.'

A schoolfellow had been made to promise his dying father that he would cherish his many brothers and sisters to the extent of his own harm if need be. I intended to be shackled in no way by her who had her foot already in the next world. I would have broken all promises in any case, but I did not choose to begin my life's great adventure on a raft of broken undertakings to the dead.

A woman from the village tended my grandmother towards the end. She obliged all those needs of the failing body that I shied away from. We watched grandmother slip deeper and deeper into wherever it is that we shall all come at last. In my best scholar's voice, I read her favourite prayers as bubbles formed on her lips and her hands froze in their final grip on the sheets of which she was so proud. The parson came and went, leaving me with the corpse. I had dismissed the nurse saying that I wished to keep a vigil, to take my farewell alone. She had possibly never loved me and I had never truly loved her, but she had done her best. Here I was, educated and hale and about to begin my most important journey just as she was about to begin hers. As I chose and packed my clothing, I made observations to her, explaining why I chose this garment or discarded that. If any part of her still lingered, I deemed that she would like to be informed what I was about. I explained that I would leave her burial money in a purse on the parson's doorstep. The rest, taken from all our secret places and more than I anticipated, would see me on my way. At dawn I closed the cottage door and clenched my fingers around the head of my cudgel. I had on my strongest shoes and all the possessions I had chosen to take with me were folded neatly in a satchel. The coins were distributed at sundry points about my body. If a villain found one, then he might overlook the rest, or so I reasoned. My hopes were high and the day promised well. I delivered the purse of coins in secret to the parson's doorstep and then, with an unspoken 'God be with us both', I strode southwards. The adventure that awaited me was far far stranger than even I, with my sense of destiny, could have envisioned.

## CHAPTER ONE

‘I am your man, Sir Walter!’

I had learnt from my employer, a Master Byfield of Clerkenwell, that the great man would visit the Drapers’ Hall on a particular Wednesday. Master Byfield, who dealt in expensive cloths, was in a state beyond excitement at the thought of being invited to the same feast as one of England’s noblest sons. He conducted his business very poorly for the entire week before that Wednesday and many times observed that he thought he should perish with joy. I offered my services as his companion to Drapers’ Hall, as his protector, leaning post, whatever he willed. I was immediately refused but, having set my heart on the scheme, I persisted. It was finally agreed that I should, in the name of Byfield family pride, accompany him to the door of the Hall and await his re-appearance however many hours later. I preened and combed myself and set off some discreet paces behind my Master, my mind full of what I should say if Fortune granted me the interview I intended. For the occasion Master Byfield had loaned me a better suit of clothes than, as his man, I usually wore. The higher quality of cloth and tailoring increased my self-esteem to a degree the poor fellow was now bitterly regretting.

‘I am your man, Sir Walter!’

London is a city of swaggering and pretension. Every abject Jack Slop at his master’s back door dreams of clean hands and a splendid livery and, eventually, a household of his own. But who was trimmed with more ambition than myself? I had fetched up on Master Byfield’s doorstep a handful of years before and clever-worded my way into my present position as his secretary and Edward-of-all-errands. Now, in a far corner of the Great Hall, amongst those as worthy and yet as insignificant as himself, unhappy Master Byfield wrung his hands and silently disowned me for my forwardness.

I had easily found my way into the Hall, Thomas Cromwell's former mansion and a building that cried, 'I have arrived and I matter.' I understood perfectly the words the building spoke, just as I remembered that the builder now slept headless having failed his master the king grievously.

Sober and presentable as I was, I experienced little difficulty in flitting here and there until I was so near to Sir Walter Raleigh that I could have tweaked his ear had I so wished. He looked a little angrily at me and placed his hand where the hilt of his dagger should have been. The wine was to flow freely and all weapons had been forbidden. I made a bow and swept my hands back to show that I carried no dangerous blade. Master Byfield was not alone in thinking me forward. There was I at the heart of the gathering, well brushed over-all and intelligent of face, although wearing the dowdiest of plumages in comparison with the peacock magnificoes all about me. But my song was a chirrup they should all hear.

'You are no man of mine,' said Sir Walter and held his own hands in front of him as if I meant to spring.

'I am come to offer my services to you,' I answered. 'I am strong, willing and I have been to the king's own Grammar School.'

'Have you by God? And so has many a fellow who has swung at a rope's end before now.'

'I offer you devotion and the finest handwriting you will see.' This mixture of talents seemed comical, even to me, and I joined in the laughter. Against my expectation, Sir Walter decided to play with me a while, like a handful of nuts or radishes taken to sharpen the appetite before dinner.

'Would you sail with me to heathen shores?' he demanded.

'I would sir.'

'Would you let the savage's arrow strike your own breast rather than mine?'

‘All that, and I could make a poultice from the hedgerow or compose you a stanza in Latin.’

There was more laughter. I smiled too and held myself up straight. Many eyes were appraising me and I intended that Edward Harry should impress them. In truth, I believed that the nuts and radishes were done and that I should be kicked back down to my proper place outside such a gathering. Sir Walter’s mood was the mood of us all and we waited as he mused on thoughts we could not guess. Eventually he said, ‘Would you be willing to be given to my friend?’

Here was the rub. Should I be saucy now or a man without esteem? I chose sauciness.

‘I would gladly be your servant sir, but I am in no man’s gift.’

‘Well said. So you would be my man but not my dog?’

He turned to a companion who had barely joined in the laughter, a man of my own height with a high, clear brow and a sharp, disapproving nose. My words had not entertained this man, I was well aware, and I half expected him to order me a beating for my presumption.

‘And what is your opinion of this youth who has been to the king’s own Grammar School?’ Sir Walter asked his friend.

‘I think he should look to his manners.’

‘But he has sworn to present his own breast to the arrow of the savage.’

Sir Walter was disposed to continue his quipping although a shuffling round about suggested that others were growing tired of the interview. Had I failed? I spoke out again.

‘Sir,’ to Master Disapproval, ‘I promise nothing I cannot discharge. This is neither the time nor the place for me to pen you a paragraph but you seem a gentleman who could test the truth of my Latin.’

Let him find this a challenge if he felt so minded. If he could not test me in the authors then I was the better scholar and I could be kicked from the Hall knowing this.

Of a sudden he said, nay whispered, *Tu calamos inflare levis, ego dicere versus. Hic corylis mixtas inter consedimus ulmos?*

I was expected to fall on my arse here. His eyes were gimlets and the circle of amusement closed around me. I drew in a breath and looked directly back at him.

*You are skilled in blowing the light reed pipe and I in composing verses. Shall we sit here together where the nut trees commingle with the beeches?*

There was applause and Sir Walter struck me on the arm.

*Hazels and elm trees*, said his friend. I stood corrected.

But thus it was that I became the secretary and copyist of Mr Edmund Spenser, Clerk to the Council of Munster, Sheriff of the city of Cork and a poet who composed verses beneath trees of all kinds while I wrote down his lines in a hand which far excelled that of anyone I have ever known. There were savages and heathens too as Sir Walter had suggested for we were all to sail for Ireland within the month. Master Byfield suddenly discovered that I was a most valuable member of his household and he underwent near-fatal excesses of joy when he was asked graciously to release me by Sir Walter himself. This joy did not extend to letting me keep the better suit of clothes despite my asking directly for it. Mistress Byfield refused to believe that I would survive my Irish experience. She said that every night she dreamt of my defiled corpse sliding into an Irish marsh while the rain teemed and the wild natives cackled.

We sailed in April 1591, not All-Fools' Day, although it might just as well have been so for the weather was poor even for the Irish Sea. In many ways, however, I was more uncomfortable when we first set sail and were still able to stand on deck and gaze at a flat, unruffled horizon. Master Spenser had engaged me somewhat precipitately, barely interrogating me and trusting mostly to the good opinions of Master Byfield and Sir Walter Raleigh himself. To pass the time, as Bristol disappeared behind us, my new master asked me questions about my family and early life. He had quickly established that my Latin was as good

as I claimed it was and now set himself to learn more of this young man he had so recently taken on. I was reluctant to begin my service with him with a set of falsehoods, but, on certain aspects of my life, I was obliged to do so if I wished him to pay me the respect I craved. I answered each of his enquiries brightly and he would never have guessed what I was about.

‘My father was an honest man of little learning and less religion,’ I said to diminish any interest Master Spenser might have had in him. ‘He died and left me in the care of my grandmother. I have my name from him, my manners from the aged dame who managed me and my first steps in Latin from our local parson. He made me ready for the King’s Grammar School and no doubt thought I should grow up to be an industrious, sensible fellow fit to be an usher in such a school myself.’

‘And *are* you fit for such a post?’

‘I prefer where I find myself now, sir. An usher’s place is mostly to thrash unruly boys and I should soon grow tired of that.’

‘To be sure.’

It was a long voyage as we were tossed off our course with every exhalation of the gale that dogged us. I truly believe it was the breath of disapproval puffed out by Hibernia herself to deter us from ever setting foot there. Sir Walter laughed at our discomfort which was unkind as Master Spenser all but died from his puking. My first true service in his employ was to wipe the vomit that liberally sprayed his breeches and mine. We were a sorry, stinking pair by the time the wind dropped and the coast of Ireland slid into view. Our first port of call was Youghal on the Blackwater River, Sir Walter’s town, where the harbour walls shut out the rough seas like an oaken door. My new master and I lay on the floor of his cabin too wrecked by the voyage to enjoy the quiet. We had both called for death any number of times while Sir Walter guffawed and told us that such outcries were the worst kind of ill-luck. We said goodbye to him and continued our journey along the coast to the city of Cork. We pulled into the channel

and made our way through the marsh-fringed waterways that lead to this strongly-walled outpost of England.

‘There is a kern with his javelin aimed at our hearts behind every clump of reeds that you see,’ said Master Spenser. ‘Never be so seduced by the beauties of this land that you forget this.’

These were not the sentiments I wished to hear as we sailed in our hardy ship towards a city that looked as resolute as I imagined a city could. I had helped him into a new shirt and an expensive suit of clothes slashed with several shades of green as it would not do for a man of his significance and Her Majesty’s newest pensioner to arrive home looking as wretched as we still both felt. I had washed my face and chewed an apple to sweeten my mouth but my breeches were in a sorry way. As soon as we had tied up, I found myself too busy to worry about my appearance or to wonder whether I should hear the whistle of an unfriendly javelin. I had offered myself as secretary and young man of all work and now I had to fulfil that promise. Struggling ashore with the chest of books and writing materials which I had been told were my main concern, I had no time to think, ‘So now I am in Ireland, the more fool I.’

It fell to me to supervise the safe unloading of all my master’s effects. I am by nature the sort of person who takes to authority with great readiness and I soon had all the chests and bags on a cart. Master Spenser barely noticed, for I was merely performing that function for which he paid me, but I was enormously impressed with myself. In as resonant voice as I could manage, the actor’s boom I had admired in the London playhouse, I commanded the boy with the cart to proceed ahead of us, carefully and with a proper sense of the value of our possessions. As he turned to grasp the handles with either arm I caught the first of so many expressions of hatred that are daily writ large on the faces of that ungrateful race.

‘Get on with you,’ I said, ‘or I shall beat the surliness out of you.’

At last my master smiled at my efforts and I spat on the ground both to clear my teeth and to show what I thought about those who refused to bend to Queen Elizabeth's authority.

'We sleep tonight in Skiddy's Castle,' my Master said. 'That will put two sets of walls between our beds and this barbarian nation. Tomorrow, at first light, we start for Kilcolman Castle where I trust my Muse awaits me.'

I was more concerned with becoming acquainted with the city of Cork than I was with his muse although Sir Walter regularly dubbed him a 'Prince of Poets' and his chronicles of *The Faerie Queene* were the talk of London I gathered. I am a city man, one drawn to the varied lives of its inhabitants and I was anxious to make the most of my dubious adventure.

Cork was a mere herringbone I had noticed, a pattern of streets like a rib cage and hardly bigger than Peterborough but it had quays and ships and I wished to explore it if only to prove that I had not committed a grievous error in allowing myself to be transported there. If I arose before dawn there might be time to hasten the length of its backbone, The Queen's Majesty's Street, a grand name for a thoroughfare which stretched for little more than a quarter of a mile. In the lanes that were its ribs, Master Spenser had said there were the fashionable residences of wealthy merchants. Did 'fashionable' and 'wealthy' have the same meanings as in London, I wondered. I fancied they did not and it was perhaps as well that all my time was taken up with preparations for our departure on the morrow. Too severe a disappointment with the grandest city in that corner of Ireland might have led me to stow away aboard any ship sailing to any port in England. I was not to see the city again for several months by which time I had become, as it were, an unwilling native.

That first night I had perforce to content myself with the composition in my head of a letter to the parson in my grandmother's village. The only purpose of my letter was to give my address as 'The most venerable castle in the noble city of Cork'. I had no news to impart and only the barest good wishes. That life seemed so distant now, a child's history from a time long

gone. Perhaps London had spoiled me. It certainly had made me restless and willing to see my destiny written in the bravest, boldest letters.

I felt neither brave nor bold that very first night I spent in Ireland. Composing my ungracious letter to Parson Fitzjohn took only one of the several hours I lay awake. I could not stop thinking that, perhaps, as Mistress Byfield feared, I had travelled through that vile storm simply to find my death before the age of twenty and cheat the world of all that I could accomplish. If I had to muse on death, it should not be my own, and I turned my mind's eye to my grandmother's passing instead. The hopes I had at that time were the ones I endeavoured to recall to mind in that fortress at the scrag end of Great Elizabeth's realm.

Kilcolman Castle lay to the north of Cork. We passed through the north gate of the city and were soon on a road that had me thinking fondly of The Great North Road and all the life that teemed along it. 'A road', I said, nay a track, a scratching on the surface of the earth, but we at least had the splendour of a band of soldiers accompanying us. Master Spenser's life was too precious to Her Majesty for it to be cut short on the day after his return to Ireland and twenty men were given the responsibility of preserving it. I had never before travelled with a detachment of soldiers although I had admired sundry of Her Majesty's troops at various times in London. Some of those who accompanied us on that damp April morning were quite outlandish to my view. Their captain rode a fine horse and was encased in good English armour. We ourselves were mounted, of course, as were the dozen light cavalrymen, but eight foot soldiers had come down from the town of Buttivant to keep us company for at least part of the way. This band was composed entirely of Irishmen in the service of England. I was told that this was a most strategic way of managing our journey home and that we would have out-paced them by the time we reached Buttivant, but I was in no way reassured. These weathered men had a steel helmet and a new musket each but no shoes. To my mind, shoes were, amongst other items certainly, that which distinguished us from the savage, from the Irish in fact.

Civilisation enriches a man and living in a house, as civilised people do, inevitably softens him a little. It certainly softens the soles of his feet. I had seen the worst kind of person run barefoot in my grandmother's village and I knew all the dishonour of which such people are capable. Looking at these creatures who spoke to me in no tongue but their own, I expected the worst and I confided this to my Master on several occasions until he bid me sharply hold my tongue. I knew that he felt as I did about the significance of shoes and I was deeply surprised that he would entrust his life to a man whose toes he could see. We might just as well, I thought, lie down with the painted and be-feathered natives of America that Sir Walter had so entertainingly described to us. This band, this rabble, set to scout for us and defend us, had torn shirts and fouled breeches and each draped over his shoulders a shapeless woollen cloak. I was convinced that every word they spoke was treason against our persons and I determined after the first mile to set myself to learn their tongue as quickly as ever I could. I would catch them at their tricks and prove to my Master how cunning a strategist I was. An old man and a youth of my own age looked after our baggage cart. As soon as my scheme was formulated, I fell back and engaged the man in conversation. I had recognised the North of England in his accent and I fancied that he would be as little fooled by treacherous schemes as I was. The youth was Irish and his ready smile put me on my guard immediately.

'I wish to speak to this man alone,' I said inclining my head in a way that should have made my meaning clear. I meant that the youth should ride further behind the cart so as not to overhear a word of what I intended to say. Any English servant would have obliged me at once.

'Ride further back, will you,' I said, irritated at having to explain myself twice.

Our eyes met across the piles of baggage and the smile translated itself into a smirk. He pressed his bare knees into his horse's side and took up a position so far behind us that he no longer appeared associated with us at all. Let him be ironic, I had gained my point, but, if he

were a permanent member of Master Spenser's household, I should make it my business to see him smart whenever I could.

I turned my attention to the man. 'I have a mind to learn their language,' I said.

'Never saw no reason for that myself,' was his foolish reply.

'Who knows what they are plotting?' I nodded towards the foot soldiers.

The man laughed.

'Will you laugh with your throat cut?'

'No-one laughs with his throat cut. He's dead.'

'So you have never learnt their language?'

'Never set about learning it. I'm no scholar.'

I let out my breath in a sigh of disappointment. More than ever I was convinced that I should never see this castle of Kilcolman which had been confiscated from the brigandish Desmonds. I had stayed overnight in a castle, but perhaps I was destined never to take up residence in one. All I could do to prolong my life was to ride closely in the wake of the most heavily armed man in our company. I had rarely used a sword and could out-ride no-one. I wished I had my prayer book with me.

The man turned round in his saddle and called out to the distant youth. The words he used were Irish and I was immediately angry with him.

'You said you did not have their tongue.'

'I said I had never set out to learn it. It came upon me unawares, you might say.'

The youth was quickly with us and took an obvious delight in mouthing sentences I did not understand. How I should make them both smart. My master would be told of this mockery. At the Grammar School they would have felt the flat of my hand already.

'Calvagh will teach you all you wish to know, sir,' said the man suddenly penitent.

'Does he speak English?'

‘That I do, sir.’

*And I shall teach you to speak when you are spoken to*, I thought.

He could not tell me all I wished to know. How could I ask him to give me the phrases which meant ‘Let us drive the English into the sea,’ or ‘At which one are you going to throw your javelin?’? And nor could I simply ride away and leave him in possession of the field. I was obliged for an hour at least to be his pupil but I would be a very testy one.

The man made an excuse to do with I don’t remember what and rode away. We two youths looked closely at each other again. Once more I refused to smile. We were of an age and both were well-formed. A credit to both our races, no doubt, with the important distinction that I was English and destined to consort with gentlemen and he was a lad who sat his horse well but who all too easily forgot his station. His face was long like mine but, where his was framed by dark, unruly curls, I had paid for the services of a barber and my lighter hair was in a state of neat governance.

‘This will be your first word of Irish,’ he said presuming to speak first.

‘I believe I shall choose my own first word. Tell me the words for *the man*.’

‘*An fear*.’

‘*An fear*.’

And so our lesson continued for a full hour. I noted his courtesy as a teacher and he noted my quickness of study. It was not a tongue I had ever thought worth the learning, but the effort cost me little and I was sure I silenced the voice of mockery that had been laughing at his ear. At the end of the hour I rode away with thanks as brief as I could make them.

We passed through Buttivant where we took a meal at the castle to renew an acquaintance and shook off our handful of foot soldiers. I was glad to see them go, although I was convinced that they left us simply to hide in coverts and take aim at our hearts. I did not confide my fears to Master Spenser as he was too agitated with the thought that his own

castle would shortly come into our view. He was correct in this as the castle of Kilcolman was visible a long time before we rode to safety through its gateway. I had been musing that the gentle undulations of the countryside were much like those I enjoyed when I rambled into the county of Northamptonshire so adjacent to my grandmother's home. The grass was of the same hue and there were no mountains or crags or bears to fright us. Behind the castle was set a range of dark, brooding hills against which the tower rose firmly in an act of defiance that caught the essence of our place in a land where hatred assailed us on all sides. We were that tower and the Irish themselves were the dark hills, brooding and festering in their unjust sense of an injustice done to them. We were the light and the strength and they were the darkness. I could have wept when I touched the stones of Kilcolman Castle for the first time. I felt so at one with Master Spenser's sheer Englishness that I did not then, or for a long time, think to investigate all the sources of his inspiration or those energies which made him the man, *an fear*, that he was.

## CHAPTER TWO

I understood why the outlaws of the Desmond family had placed their stronghold in that spot some hundreds of years before when the land was even less inclined to order. It stood upon an eminence with low cliffs at the back and a lake in front. Master Spenser called it a lake but to me it was a Fen. I had seen the Fens and I knew all too well the awkwardness of reed beds to a boat and the plaguing by flies when a July sun has drawn up the water.

We approached by a narrow, straight road that skirted the northern shore of the lake. I could imagine the waves over-running it during winter months. The road led to a shore directly in front of the castle, a black strand pitted with the marks of cattle hooves.

A collection of healthy beasts grazed beneath the outer wall and made little attempt to step aside as our train passed through the gates. Obstinacy was in the very beasts of the field, I observed, but I would tame this errant spirit wherever I could.

In the castle yard beneath the great keep a party had assembled - scullions, housekeepers, men on official business that had kept for eighteen months, and two small children. In all the time that I had known him, Master Spenser had talked at length of his poetry, of Latin metres naturalised into English, but never once had he mentioned the son and daughter who jumped about recklessly beneath the feet of his horse. In some way I felt that they challenged my own position. Would not a man prefer to have his own son as secretary as soon as he had conned his letters well enough?

For the moment I put such fears aside and basked in the goodwill that included my own self as much as anyone. I was smiles to all, particularly as I meant to be lodged as fairly as I could. The castle was very old and bore clear signs of recent repair. It might be stalwart, but I expected that it would offer little in the way of comfort.

Imagine my delight, therefore, to discover that Master Spenser had contrived to insert a comfortable English gentleman's house within the very fabric of this forbidding pile. The outer walls of the keep had been reduced in thickness, windows of a good size inserted and plaster and panelling applied where none had ever been dreamt of before. Above the great hall, two new floors contained our private chambers with a degree of pleasance I could never have anticipated. There was a separate parlour a step across from the keep and the usual offices, kitchen, servants' quarters and stables stretched along the east and western walls. We even had the luxury of gardens, two indeed, but of modest size for they had to be accommodated with the walled ground, the *bawn* as they termed it, of the castle.

A man came forward and was acknowledged warmly.

'Welcome home, Master.'

This must be the steward. I doffed my bonnet to him and jumped down.

'My factotum,' said Master Spenser. 'Lodge him near me.'

My mood was at once lighter and I joined in the embracing of the children, an act I usually avoid. The boy was to be dispossessed of his room in my favour it soon transpired. I expected him to regard me with dislike thereafter but he was happy to be lodged with the steward whom he had made his particular friend in his father's absence.

We dined that night in the great hall of the castle. I soon understood that Master Spenser used this room when he was the lord and the parlour when he was the gentleman. He was a poet in both and from one day to the next I could not tell where I should be obliged to spread my papers. Our meal would have satisfied a king and his court. There was music and the youth Calvagh sang a song to which I did not listen. I was too busy delighting in my position at the lord's right hand near the top of the table set along the wall. The meat was succulent and the gravy rich and I drank all the wine I could have wanted.

Our first week was given over to business, both concerning the Spenser lands and to Munster as a whole. The castle gate was regularly opened to visitors and all manner of secrets flowed through my pen as I wrote and wrote. A gift I have is to write at enormous speed with never a blot or the need to cross through. My penmanship became quite the wonder of the castle.

The poet re-appeared in due course. It was nearly May and the sun had shown an inclination to shine.

‘I hear the voices of my Muse,’ Master Spenser said to me. ‘But is it the voice of river or hill, water nymph or faun?’

Such conversation was new to me and I merely smiled. We had been sitting at the highest window of the castle pointing out features of the landscape to the children. The game was for the boy or girl to say, ‘Look the sun is shining there now,’ and Master Spenser would name what they had seen. His knowledge was substantial and mine, of course, was nothing. I was glad of the prospect of a ride to some spot or other so that I might acquaint myself with the geography of my new home. I still harboured doubts that one day I might need to flee from it and I at least needed to know where the main roads or watercourses were. The girl, Katherine, seven years old and a favourite of the household, made the decision for us.

‘I hear them calling from the river,’ she said. ‘Hark.’

And so to the Awbeg we went, the stream that washes the feet of the castle at Buttivant. There would be poetic composition and visiting and I should have exercise on a horse. I wondered whether I might be required to stand *in* the stream itself while my master, equally wet-shod, intoned his verses and I scribbled and shivered. It was not like that. He sat at a distance under a tree and pondered and I sharpened quills and poured his drink. It was an agreeably lazy way to spend my days and I was sure it could not last forever. The youth Calvagh rode with us as it gave him a direction when he exercised a trio of horses from the castle stables.

This, I gathered, was his major skill and I did not resent him overly as he took pains to remain obscured once we were settled by the river.

By the end of the day I was surprised to see how thorough this visitation of the water Muses had been. The stock of paper I had carried with me was almost used up.

‘The work has unfolded itself to me,’ said Master Spenser as we prepared to depart. ‘Generally I struggle more with the arrangement of my verses. You, Hobbinol, and Cuddy yonder are on the page fully-fleshed so early. My thanks to you.’

‘Who are these people sir?’

He shuffled through those pages I was yet to reproduce in neat copy.

‘*A bonny swain that Cuddy hight.* By him I mean the boy Calvagh. He asks Colin, myself, a shepherd, who has of late come home to recount *The passed fortunes, which to thee befell In thy late voyage.* By this I mean my year in London where I chanced to observe much that I shall sharply glance at in my poem. The conceit of it contents me greatly.’

‘And the other person, sir?’

‘Hobbinol, yourself.’

‘Who is this ‘*Hobbinol*’? A wandering knight?’ I spoke my thought out loud and much too soon. My master’s laughter brought Cuddy from behind his tree. I glowered as much as ever I dared.

‘You are to understand that we are all countryfolk in this poem. You have read Vergil. It was indeed your excellent translation of his ‘*Eclogue*’ that brought you to my notice. We are shepherds in Arcady. Listen. *Hobbinol: a jolly groom was he, as ever piped on an oaten reed.*’

Let me not be a groom! I was disgusted. My name combined *Dobbin* and *clodpoll* and *hobby-horse*, utterly unworthy words. Master Spenser laughed again.

‘You shall write me a fair copy as soon as we return home so that tonight I may polish and re-fashion these lines.’

He might use them in the privy for all I cared. *Hobbinol*. It was a name unworthy of my arse and I longed to tell him so but I smiled and was no fool. What made my smart the sharper was that he so loved his conceit he explained it to our saucy Irish companion. So this was what it was to be the plaything of the mighty. What foolishness had led me to think that if I chose to strut along those corridors where greatness strode I should not be made to confront my own lowly station.

Our journey home was a time of great distress for me as Master Spenser expanded upon his scheme for the poem and refused to address me by my own good name. I was mortified to a degree that no schoolmaster with his sarcasms and his cane had ever managed. How I hated *Colin* and *Hobbinol* and *Cuddy* and wished all the plague marks of a stinking London summer upon them.

When my master rode ahead to contend with all the thoughts of Arcady that were buzzing in his brain, the youth Calvagh drew close to me and made mouths, forming the name *Hobbinol* with great deliberation. His own wit proved too much for him for of a sudden a yell of laughter roared from his lips and set the horses a-fidget. My master turned around and laughed too, not bothering to ask the cause of the merriment which I was most eager to impart.

‘Such a day we have had,’ he said to us. ‘Such a day. A hundred lines of verse, good fellowship and a bright sun. A man could ask for no more. Look there is our castle framed by old father Mole that mountain grey. How I do love it here in Mulla’s bosky vale.’ Such were the fanciful names he had given to our surroundings and I determined that not one of them should ever pass my lips even though I was duty bound to write them down for him. We re-entered the castle to the sound of his own laughter, to that of our peasant companion and to that of the children who scampered to meet their father. I alone scowled, but inwardly.

‘Sir, I shall begin my copying now,’ I said and took the pages which had caused me such offence. I wrote them out in my fairest hand and hated them the more for it. *Hobbinol*. I was no man’s *Hobbinol* or hobby-horse.

After our evening meal, taken in the comfort of the parlour, Master Spenser retired with his own thoughts and my neat copy of his verses. Once again my speed and clarity of writing impressed him. Rather than sit despondent, I decided to venture where hitherto I had felt it beneath me. The outdoor servants lodged in a low rough-cast building which I would dearly have liked to call a hovel although it was tidy and in no way tumble-down. I assumed that the youth Calvagh repaired here when his duties of the day were over. My rage against him had grown each time I wrote his name or mine in Master Spenser’s poem of Colin come home. I would scold him, teach him a lesson. My plan was ill-formed and childish, but yet I proceeded with it.

The sound of conviviality drew me to a door that was shut against the coolness of the night. An instrument was being plucked and a man’s voice sang plaintively. I stood for a while to listen. I am no musician myself but I have an ear for good music and I applauded the skill of the performers. This did not assuage my anger, however. Rather it sharpened my discontent that Irishmen should have not a care in the world while I stood in the darkness with an unruly youth’s laughter still sharp in my memory. I seized the handle of the door and threw it open with all my force. What a collection of rascallions was there exposed before me. By the light of a small fire, they lounged or squatted while Cuddy himself, his eyes closed and his head thrown back, entertained them. The music ceased at once and they stumbled to their feet. The old man who had ridden back from Cork with us gently nudged a jug with his foot lest it be knocked over. My master’s stolen ale no doubt.

‘Be you welcome, sir,’ said the old man.

Welcome be damned! I would never squat down by a fire with the enemy and my look told them so.

‘Shall I sing for you sir? We know some melodies in the English.’

Calvagh had bowed to me but the bow was not enough.

‘You have no shoes,’ I said. ‘I could never listen to a minstrel without shoes.’

This was the observation of a fool, an angry fool. In attempting to reprimand the one, I had made myself ridiculous in the eyes of the many. I recollected myself.

‘Your manner today was offensive,’ I said. ‘My master shall know if it.’ Then I walked out and shut the door behind me. I stood still to gather my thoughts, taking shallow, frequent breaths. The door opened and shut again. He came and knelt before me. Knelt. No man had ever knelt before me not even in my silly, fanciful dreams where I had wealth and enormous power.

‘Do not kneel,’ I said. ‘I find that offensive too. The horses have fouled the ground in this spot.’

Without further words I walked away from him. Such dignity as I had assumed for myself lay on the ground there with the horse dung. Perhaps I was not made for greatness after all if my conscience did not let me carry it off better than this.

### CHAPTER THREE

There was the question of my bed. When Master Spenser's boy was despatched from his room to lodge with the steward, his bed remained behind until such time as a bed of the right size could be constructed for me. For three nights my legs extended as far as my shins beyond the end of the bed. I did not ask whether the child during this time was obliged to lie on the floor or even to snuggle with the steward himself. Their chamber was in the upper-most storey of the keep where the meanest rooms were, a fact which should have filled me with guilty feelings. I reasoned that if the boy's own father was contented with the arrangement then it was not my place to speak up.

One aspect of the boy's life that disturbed me as I thought it reflected on us all was that he received very little in the way of instruction. If it was not enough that his father christened the unfortunate mite Sylvanus, at least it was not Hobbinol, he paid little heed to the companionship the boy kept with Irish and outdoor servant alike. The boy's mother had, it appeared, died a year or two before and the life of the castle was noticeable for the lack of a guiding female hand.

In a sense I set out to provide this hand myself as I did not intend to slip into uncouth ways of speech or habit simply because I was banished from England. I put a suggestion to Master Spenser: in the mornings I could spend an hour or two instructing his son. My competence in Latin was acknowledged and, if primers were sent for, I did not doubt that I could make the ludicrously named child ready for any decent English school in due course. The plan was accepted and we set to. My first words to the boy were, 'If you are lazy or pert I shall thrash you,' but the threat was unnecessary. In pleasing me with learning his lessons, Sylvanus sought to please the father who largely ignored him. At least he knew his father; others of us have not been so blessed in that regard. I did not care to think how many afternoons

Sylvanus must spend looking at the door of whichever room contained a father wholly occupied with quaintly named Muses oblivious to the filial distress his coolness caused. Whenever I could, I introduced the boy to his father and commended his learning. About the castle I was regarded as the boy's champion and I gained respect from those whose respect I valued not at all. It seemed to me to be worth noting in a book somewhere that our detailed schemes often have consequences we never envisaged. The boy partly adored me and it was very easy for me to estrange him from those rough fellows he had begun to call his friends.

My own rough fellow, the *bonny swain* as Master Spenser had named him, avoided my company for days after he had demeaned himself in the horse dung. When he was not flung from the castle he realised that I had kept my peace. The old man, Joshua Parkin, approached me on one occasion but I waved him away without asking his business.

My afternoons were spent by the River Awbeg at Buttivant as the tale of Colin come home continued apace. The youth Calvagh had been told to ride with us on most occasions but he kept as far from us as he dared. My master did not notice this, being so taken with his verses. There is a wide path beside the river which is itself a goodly stream, not wide or deep but fast-flowing and clear. I enjoyed the melody of its gurglings as, from day to day, we changed the spot where the Muses would speak to us. Beside the path was a high bank, taller perhaps than the height of two men, and steep. Trees fringed the bank and had established themselves along the path itself so that we sat at best in dappled sunlight. It was never warm, but light flashed on the water and I was kept busy. I could fancy myself quite elsewhere, not on that island inhabited by too many of God's forsaken, but in some tranquil corner of the Arcady that Master Spenser always carried in his head. Our meals were taken in the castle of Buttivant and much was made of both of us. My life was what I felt it should be with my talents recognised, my belly filled and the servants in awe of me. I had a pair of new short boots, purchased at Master Spenser's cost in London, and none but the best of tableware and dainties would please me.

Some days, Arcady flew away like a cloud before the breeze and Master Spenser's head cleared remarkably. This happened when certain men arrived at Kilcolman with despatches and we repaired to a closet set in the thickness of the keep walls directly off the great hall and where not even the mice might overhear us. The men were rarely named and I became simply 'My secretary whom we may trust.' My age gave rise to comment but my master would have none of it. 'Older than his years,' he said although I confess I scarcely felt this. It was now I became the patriot and the politician, scribing letter after letter and becoming privy to secrets of policy that frightened me. After the second visit, Master Spenser took me back up to that eyrie where none might hear us.

'We must talk a little,' he said. 'Be Hobbinol no longer. The safety of Her Majesty's realm is in our hands although you might not realise it.'

I simply nodded as if I had understood the full import of what passed between him and the un-named gentlemen.

'You surely know, Edward,' he began, 'that the Irish do strongly hate and abhor all reformation and subjection to the English by reason that, having been once before subdued by them, they were thrust out of all their possessions.'

I remained silent not knowing whether to allow any justice in the hatred of the Irish. That they had lost all their possessions no doubt followed because they were unfit to hold them. He took my silence as deep thought which, indeed, it was not.

'So now they fear that if they were again brought under they should be likewise expelled out of all. This is the cause that they hate the English government which is represented by both our persons, yours no less than mine.'

'Dark words sir. But will not good laws and sharp penalties for their infringement amend all that is presently amiss?'

‘This is the realm of Ireland, Edward. It is unlike all other realms. All men have their ears upright waiting when the watch-word shall come that they shall all arise generally into rebellion and cast away the English subjection.’

‘How then may the country be reformed, sir?’

‘Even by the sword. All these evils must first be cut away by a strong hand before any good can be planted.’

Such words I had not expected to hear as we dallied by the riverside. I looked beyond the window now and appreciated all that I saw in a new light. Enemies with javelins aimed at my heart certainly lurked behind every reed and under every stone. I wondered that Master Spenser kept his children with him at such a time but good manners held me from saying so.

‘No more of this,’ he said. ‘You have been shown enough of the thoughts of princes. I had lived many more years than you before I began to think about such matters. How old are you now?’

‘Nearly twenty, sir,’ which was, quite possibly, untrue.

‘An interesting age. Is it man or boy still? Come, let us cross to the parlour and drink some wine. The lack of colour in your face betrays you.’

In the days following this conversation, I viewed any excursion away from the castle with great trepidation. Master Spenser behaved otherwise. His delight in gazing upon ‘Old Mole’ or sitting beside the ‘River Mulla’s’ side, as he re-named them all, was unabated. He seemed to be two men, the one quite willing to root out all Irishmen so that the other, the poet, could enjoy their countryside in peace. I found him a conundrum, with his hair and beard trimmed and yet his poet’s dress a little disordered, the shirt more than willing to push its way through the fastenings of his doublet and the threads of his everyday breeches all tugged. The colour of his stockings on poetry days rarely accorded with any other main colour in his apparel. For myself, I had brought from London Master Byfield’s parting gift of a leather jerkin

which at first I avoided as being too drab or mean for my new office. Now I regarded the leather as my best defence against an assassin's knife and I wore the garment in all weathers.

'We must have you fitted for a new jerkin at Cork,' said Master Spenser.

'The cow that gave you your leather was a sickly beast I think. Besides, when you accompany me outside wearing it, I am put in mind of a common tradesman. I would not have my neighbours suppose I deal in dried peas.'

The prospect of a visit to the city of Cork pleased me and I wore my old jerkin all the more, if that were possible, so that my Master should be reminded of his promise. It was soon forgot, perhaps because the Queen's pension, granted in February last, was still not paid and letters had to be written to release it. It was I who penned the letters and whether it was the elegance of my hand or the plaintive, bleating words of Master Spenser that brought the money I never knew.

A dagger was worn each time we rode out, but, for me, the decoration of the hilt had mattered more than the sharpness of the blade. Now, with the word 'rebellion' taken to my heart, I ventured for the first time into the guard-room at the base of the keep and made one of the handful of soldiers Master Spenser kept always to hand oblige me with practice in the use of my dagger. No doubt he relished twisting my arm or tripping me to the floor, but I advanced in skill and did not care who saw me tumble. Only one time was it the youth Calvagh and he was careful to avert his eyes. At least I should not be mocked from that corner again.

I admitted that I was surprised when a visit was planned to the range of hills at our rear, the *Mountains* of Ballyhoura so-called. Even if we avoided the stretches of woodland, I still fancied that a band of cut-throats could lie concealed amongst the rocks and tussocks until we were too close to make good our escape. My master seemed reckless of such danger and told me that young Sylvanus would have no fear of riding to such a place. We took two soldiers with us, however, although their brutal presence frightened the Muses all day long and not a

word was written. We admired the view back to the castle and beyond and sat about at our ease as Master Spenser besought the inspiration that evaded him.

‘No soldiers next time,’ he said which I thought most wilful as he had spoken it in front of the youth Calvagh. I determined not to mince my words about this subject when we were home again. I did not mind courting his displeasure if I could save his life. Joshua Parkin had brought my master’s dinner in a basket. He was a man of clean appearance and his clothing was always in good order, but I relieved him of the duty of actually serving the meal. My grandmother had always impressed upon me the necessity for clean hands and a clean knife at table and I wanted to make sure that my master had both of these for his meal. His beef was accordingly presented without grit and the bread had no grey thumb print of the kind which often prevented me from eating it at public tables in London. After dinner, Master Spenser slept, perhaps hoping that the Fauns of old Mole would visit him in a dream. The soldiers sat near him resolutely awake, muskets cocked up and down the hill and casques firmly on their heads. I wandered about playing my game of *What is it I can see now?* I knew the direction of the castle of Buttivant and, some miles beyond that, the Blackwater River that could be followed to Sir Walter Raleigh’s house at Youghal. My several escape routes were becoming clearer daily.

‘Would you permit me to show you something sir?’ The youth Calvagh had approached silently as I stood debating the virtues of swimming all the way down the Blackwater to Youghal. I was wondering when the tide would catch me and ease my weary arms. When he spoke, I sprang round at once with my dagger drawn.

‘You fool!’ I said. ‘This is no land to whisper in a man’s ear.’

‘I mean you no harm, sir.’

‘Nor I you.’

Were we both lying?

‘There is a trick of the rocks here that I thought might amuse you.’

Might it not amuse *him* to tumble me down these rocks and then claim that I tripped and broke my neck?

‘What is this trick?’

‘A trumpet in the ground. An echo. Shall I show you?’

‘Is it far?’

‘Minutes only.’

Minutes were enough when a man’s life was at stake.

‘Does Joshua Parkin know of this natural trumpet?’

‘I have never shown it to him.’

I did not re-sheathe my dagger.

‘There is no need for that,’ he said. ‘You can see I carry no weapon and I have removed my shoes.’

I had indeed noticed this and it was on the tip of my tongue to observe that by removing his shoes he had taken upon himself the Irishness against which I needed to be on my guard. Did he really pose a danger? The only clothing he wore was a flapping yellow tunic that left his long legs bare. The soldier in the guard-house had shown me how easily I could grasp the sleeves of such a garment and throw the wearer to the ground. The sleeves could also serve to throttle him. He was slimmer than I and perhaps too nimble although no-one would ever call me lumbering.

‘How you English are given to thinking.’

‘We are at times. I shall tell the soldiers where you intend to take me.’

‘They must not come too.’

‘So I am to be isolated?’

‘No. It is a sight for your eyes alone. They are inclined to jeer. It is only a crack in the ground after all.’

A crack down which I might plunge while screaming unheard. Fool, I went with him.

We passed into a group of trees and I was at once alarmed.

‘These are oak trees,’ he said. ‘*Na crainn daracha*. They should not grow here.’

‘I know they are oak trees. You are not the only boy who wandered the fields and picked at leaves. The spot is windy and quite above the plain, but you are wrong to say that they should not grow here. They will not grow high, that is all.’

‘I thought all Englishmen came from London.’

‘I have lived in London but I was not born there.’

‘Where were you born?’

I let his question hang between us unanswered. ‘In a modest cottage, the unacknowledged whelp of some careless-loined gentleman,’ might have been my reply. He did not need to know that.

‘Where is the trumpet you promised?’ I asked.

He led me in amongst the trees where a scatter of rocks had almost bubbled from the ground. I would have passed the spot without casting a second glance. Stones bubbled the world over.

‘Look,’ he said and led me to the centre of the stones.

‘They look like a boil,’ I said. ‘The circle is neat and there is a hole in the middle.’

‘That is my trumpet.’

‘He lay at length with his head over the hole and made a hooting sound by cupping his hands. The sound echoed deep within the earth and was most unsettling. He stood up and motioned for me to repeat his action. More words of alarm raced through my brain. With a

blow he could sever my head and watch it disappear forever into whatever cave or well lay below.

‘I shall stand over here,’ he said guessing my thoughts.

I lay beside the hole and made my own hooting sound that I fancied was louder than his. He returned and made a chittering sound like a sparrow that has been embraced by a magpie. We both smiled at the echo. I showed that I could do this too.

‘The hole is too narrow for a man,’ I said. ‘I should dearly love to know what is at the bottom.’

‘Some say it is a window to that other place.’

‘Hell? Have we been hooting at the Devil?’

‘Not Hell. *Tír Na nÓg*. The land of the *Sidhe*, the *Other* folk. Do you notice that the oak trees have been planted in a circle?’

‘They have *grown* in a circle.’

On an impulse I lay down over the hole again and shouted as resolutely as I could, ‘My name is Edward Harry. I am an Englishman and I bid you all good morrow.’

‘Anyone sitting by the window will have heard me,’ I said as I sat up.

My words had impressed or frightened Calvagh. He could do nothing but imitate me for his pride could not allow an Englishman to be the sole flouter of the old mole at the bottom of the trumpet.

‘My name is Calvagh Ó Gamhnain, kin to the Desmond, and I also wish you good morrow.’

We looked at each other. He had confided a great secret to me.

‘Why did you tell me you were kin to the Desmond?’ I asked. ‘We killed him not ten years ago. You should not have mentioned his name.’

‘I am bastard kin. It was a boast. I am not recognised in their houses or welcomed. I have more welcome amongst the English.’

‘You still should not have told me. What am I to say to Master Spenser?’

‘His other spies will have told him. I could be held hostage, with you as my jailer.’

‘I would make you wear your shoes in which case,’ I told him roughly.

‘Perhaps I would obey you.’

As we walked away, he glanced back over his shoulder.

‘There are many windows and doors to that other realm. There may even be doors in England. Sometimes we do not know of their windows and doors and they are secretly watching us. Our words were offered in friendly greeting, I think.’

I did not mock him if that was what he expected. My grandmother had often talked of Robin Goodfellow as we perched by the winter fireside and who was I to scoff at Robin’s Irish cousins who lived in a trumpet? These notions seemed somehow treacherous and foolish and I marched ahead saying I needed to see if my master were awake. I needed also to decide whether I wished to be drawn into this pert young fellow’s company. Bastard kin. Like with like. Was Destiny offering me a sharp rebuke as I reached out for glory and the company of my betters?