

LOVELY OUDIVINE

THE GREEN MAN



M. KING

Scanning, uploading and/or distribution of this book via the Internet, print, audio recordings or any other means without the permission of the Publisher is illegal and will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and characters are fictitious in every regard. Any similarities to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

**The Green Man
Copyright©2009 M. King
ISBN 978-1-60054-395-1
His and His Kisses Edition
Cover art and design by M. King**

All rights reserved. Except for review purposes, the reproduction of this book in whole or part, electronically or mechanically, constitutes a copyright violation.

**Published by loveyoudivine Alterotica
2009**

**Find us on the World Wide Web at
www.loveyoudivine.com**

The Green Man

By

M. King

Gwyn spent most of his nights at cards. Whenever the road took him by towns or villages with good taverns, he stopped to play. Wherever the beer came in tankards of pewter with condensation beading on their outsides like crystal jewels – and the locals didn't know him – he could make a living good enough to keep him, body and soul, for months at a time.

Well, body, anyway. Soul didn't seem to matter so much these days.

He looked at the two queens in his hand, carefully edged them away from the other cards, then laid them down on the heavily scarred pine table. The pub had grown so quiet, with every eye in the place on his game, that the soft click of the cards on the wood rang out, harsh in the silence.

"There you are, boy," Gwyn said, the easy lilt of his accent – mellow Welsh valleys, not like these hard, stupid, upland men – filling the silence. "Should have folded as you had the chance, shouldn't you?"

He reached out and smoothly scooped up the pile of coins that, to the blacksmith, butcher's apprentice, and farmhand he'd been playing, represented a combined week's wage. Gwyn knew, from long experience of this scene, played out over and over again in different towns, that now really should be the time to leave. Up to a point, a man might be pressed to try and win back his losses, especially if he had a wife at home. But, when he got a certain look on his face – such a look as now started to rumble across the sweaty red cheeks of the butcher's apprentice – prudence became more a necessity than virtue. A stout pair of boots good for running in didn't go amiss, either.

"Filthy gyppo!" the butcher's apprentice cried. "Damn gypsy beggar's a cheat and a liar!"

Gwyn eased back from the table, the money tucked safely into his waistcoat and his eye already on the door. He held up his hands, spread wide and conciliatory.

"Now then, fellas...no call for that sort of thing, is there?"

The butcher's apprentice – worryingly well-built for a lad who could be no more than nineteen – raised one sausage-fat finger and pointed it at Gwyn.

"He's read them cards in the future, he has! Or else pulled some devil's trick. Check his sleeves!"

The farmhand and the blacksmith moved to grab him, but Gwyn was too quick. With practiced grace and nimble ease, he leapt back and slipped around them, diving for the door and the cool night air. The village's narrow, cobbled streets slid easily by under his feet, and Gwyn ran through the shadows, listening for his pursuers blundering about in the darkness behind him. He took a left by the Presbyterian Church, cutting away from the marketplace and cemetery, up towards the open fields and the scrubland that lay beyond. Without daylight, the whole place was nothing more than jumbled shapes in different tones of black. There were no gaslights in the streets here, and decent folk all had their windows tight shut against the night. Gwyn had earmarked the route he knew he might have to take. He

sniffed. The smell of farmyards and pig manure, heavier here on the air, meant he'd come to the far fields and he pulled in to wait behind a barn, straining his ears for the sound of flat-footed steps petering out in the distance.

"We've lost him, Ieuan!"

The blacksmith, Gwyn thought; he recognized the gruff tones.

"No, he can't have gone far. Try down here."

Definitely the butcher's apprentice, that hint of a whine still in his voice though he'd started breathing hard.

"I ain't goin' down there in the dark," the third chipped in. "I spends all day up to my knees in pig shit, and *then* I can see where I'm goin'. I in't doin' it in the dark. Leave him to fall in the muck hisself, boys."

Gwyn grinned in the darkness and waited for the sound of them moving away, disappointed and denied the chance of vengeance. He exhaled, then picked his way carefully along the narrow track that led past the farm's borders and up to the campground. A grand term for it, really; just a piece of unworked land on which they'd parked up. Only three wagons now. They housed the worldly goods of Gwyn, his grandmother, aunt, uncle, and three young cousins. The horses, tethered and browsing at the scrubby edge of the grass, looked up and whickered at him as he drew nearer. From their makeshift pen behind one of the vardoes, the dogs heard his approach and gave a couple of warning barks, soon replaced by snuffling and pawing excitement at his return. Light from a campfire spilled out towards him in a ragged circle, its glow augmented by a lantern hanging off the nearest wagon. Gwyn's aunt lit it at night because the youngest cousin was afraid of the dark, and now midge-like winged things batted against its glass.

The family's welcome wouldn't last long—even less so, after Gwyn's performance in the tavern—but, as with most places, the locals were content enough to let them stay for whatever time they needed to buy pegs, or have their knives sharpened and their pots and pans mended. Their hypocrisy used to make him laugh, but now Gwyn just felt an overwhelming tiredness.

He sloped over to the fire where his grandmother sat sucking on her pipe, her voluminous skirts spread out to catch the warmth, two thick braids of iron gray hair hanging from beneath her silk headscarf. He cleared his throat—though she already knew he was here—and she played along, glancing up at him with a sparkle in her dark, clever eyes.

"Gwyn. You startled me, boy."

"Sorry, Gran. I brought you something."

She took another pull on her pipe. The scent of coltsfoot tobacco spooled up to tickle Gwyn's nose and remind him of so many snatches of childhood memories; once, it had seemed there would never be a time she couldn't make everything better. He cleared his throat, and she squinted at him through the great well of blue smoke drifting from the pipe's bowl.

"Have you?"

"Aye."

He pulled the money from his pocket and put it into the open palm she held out to him. Her hand, brown and weather-worn, hard and cracked, had been one of the few constants in his life. No matter if she was administering punishment or praise, scolding or comforting, her touch had always been there, from his earliest days to long after his parents died and ripped his childish world to shreds. Even after Jack.... No. Gwyn pulled away from that thought as if it had burned him.

Some things don't need to be relived.

His grandmother looked at the coins, firelight dancing over the metal like imps, and nodded her approval. She patted the ground beside her. Gwyn sat, glad of the warmth and the acceptance.

"You're a wicked boy, Gwyn," she announced, pocketing the cash. "'Tis a terrible sin."

"What, Gran? Gambling?"

She took another puff on her pipe, exhaling the smoke around a dark, wheezy laugh.

"No! Takin' fools' money, boy. You're no better than to be thieving from children."

Gwyn thought of the red-faced butcher's apprentice and his friends, running down the road with their fat feet flapping, and smiled.

"Sorry, Gran."

They sat for a while longer, the flames leaping and crackling on dry wood, sending the odd spark into the air, spiralling around in the heat. Gwyn knew that it was possible to see the future in the fire, though he'd never cared to look.

At length, his aunt and uncle came out to join them, the children safely tucked up in bed. Uncle Matthew, tired after all day spent dragging his knife cart around town, stretched out his legs and basked in the warmth while Aunt Maggie busied her thin, hard hands with darning her youngest's shirt.

"Fair up by Shrewsbury next week," Matthew said, packing tobacco into his pipe bowl. He cast a sidelong look at Gwyn. "Daresay we'll see Brother Harry and the cousins."

Gwyn said nothing. Harry, another of his uncles, had been good to him in his childhood, and he usually enjoyed meeting up with that vast, sprawling side of the family. But not this year. Harry had betrayed Gwyn. He'd failed to keep safe the one thing Gwyn could never forgive him for losing.

Beside him, his grandmother cleared her throat. "Dare say. Will you be wanting to go on to Newport with them, Matthew?"

Uncle Matthew watched her carefully as he answered. He was the man of the family; all decisions, all responsibilities rested with him.

"Aye, we could do."

Gwyn's grandmother pulled again on her pipe and sent a reel of blue smoke across the fire.

"Might do well. Give your children a change. New faces, and the chance to get to know the other little'uns better. Get some experience with his horses. I

hear Harry has a fine new foal by Tom Bradbury's Irish horse. Grow up a good trotter, that will."

Matthew lit his pipe, thoughtfully shaking out the fat, waxy sulphur match. He bit down on the pipe's stem and nodded, then, after a moment or two, seemed to reach a decision.

"We'll go on with them. That's my word."

The old woman said nothing but smiled. Aunt Maggie glanced up from her darning.

"As you say, Mattie."

Gwyn rose awkwardly from his seat by the fire, almost stumbling on the coarse grass.

"I've...I've got a horrible head come on. I'll go to bed. G'night."

He made it away from them and up the steps into his own wagon with the minimum of fuss, just a few remarks about too much beer and too many nights gambling. He did his best to laugh them off and shut himself away, ready to hide forever in the cramped, comforting space. Every inch of the panelling was etched with memories. This had been his parents' vardo — Gwyn's birth took place, albeit unexpectedly, right there on the narrow fold-down bed — and by the rights of tradition the wagon should have burned after they died. Gwyn's people did things that way; all links with the dead had to be severed, their names buried alongside their bodies, because you couldn't go back, you couldn't change things. He knew that, and he respected the traditions that taught it. Yet his grandmother hadn't seen the vardo burned. She'd kept it, let him learn through it, maybe even hold onto a little piece of what he'd lost.

Most folk would shy from clinging to anything that been such a part of those who now were gone. Just one of many things still considered unclean, not...right. Not proper. Gwyn's Gran, though the old ways ran deep in her blood, didn't hold with traditions just for the sake of them, and he was glad of that. Over the years, this wagon had become less a monument to those who'd passed — the ghosts of the fever that took them pushed back into the shadows cast by the memories of bright, sunlit days — and grew to be a part of Gwyn's new life.

He sat heavily on the bed and looked up at the colours of the decoration, intricate and fanciful birds, flowers and beasts curling along the wood. Last year, when they were still travelling with Harry — fifteen wagons, all in a line, and what a sight they were, with the horses coming on behind! — he'd lain in this very spot and imagined his future. Jack had been with him then, and Gwyn wished he hadn't recalled it, because the air seemed to turn cold with his absence all over again. His Jack — third cousin on his mother's side and the finest trap racer in all of Wales. *His* Jack. They'd been closer than grain to grindstone since childhood, and that love had only deepened since.

Gwyn remembered, right here on this bed, how he'd first faced the great, dark wall of panic, the fear that Jack wouldn't respond if he told him or — worse — that he'd laugh. Not so. It had been the most natural of things, like walking down to a stream and letting the water wash up, inch by inch over

his toes, until it bathed away all doubt and insecurity and left behind only the glittering reflection of light on its surface. That's what Jack was: pure joy and constant movement. Gwyn felt sure, if he closed his eyes now, he would be able to conjure him here again. The touch of his strong, hard fingers, the smell of his skin... his kisses, like rain on rose leaves. Jack's disappearance had left a void in Gwyn's world, the edges of which stayed ragged and refused to heal, however hard he tried. They'd fought a few days before. He'd seen Jack with a girl—one of Uncle Harry's daughters—looking cosy and holding hands. There were giggled mutterings about the possibility of a wedding among the women.

Gwyn confronted Jack, but it all came out wrong and, the next thing he knew, they were rolling on the ground, fists balled into each other's ribs and no holds barred. He limped away with a swollen eye and a bloody nose, burned by the look of hatred in Jack's bruised face and, in the morning, Jack had gone. No one but Gwyn thought anything of it, just expected him back a good while later with beer on his breath and a brace of poached coney in his hand. One day passed, then two. Gwyn searched but without success. He went to his Uncle Harry and begged for help. After all, Jack could have fallen foul of a snare or mantrap; he might have been set upon or tumbled into a ditch. Gwyn had thought Harry would understand that. He laid open his fears, yet all his uncle did was rip his faith to pieces.

Harry simply sucked his teeth and shook his head. They'd have known, he said, because Jack's dog would have come back without him, and she hadn't. So, like as not, he'd just taken some time to himself, or gone to see friends he was known to have across the valley. Gwyn's greatest mistake was pushing further. Harry grew angry, resenting the challenge to his authority, his position. Blows rained down on Gwyn, lashing almost as hard as Harry's sharp tongue.

After that, the grand sight of fifteen wagons split into lines of fewer, and the clan scattered in ill feeling. Jack never did turn up, though Gwyn refused to stop looking. With every day, his hope grew thinner and his doubts began to return, surging out of the dark like snake-headed monsters, vindictive and malicious. Now, a year on, most of Gwyn had just faded into the shadows. He knew his family—those closest in blood, who'd stood by him—wanted the security of rejoining Harry, and who could blame them? It would be the most sensible thing to do. Those on the road needed to stick together and, perhaps, he might find some word of Jack. Gwyn doubted it, like he doubted everything now except games of chance. That was why he'd grown to love the cards so well: the freedom that came with knowing they were beyond his control.

Gwyn lay back on the bed and stared into the dark, too empty for tears and too tired to sleep. What did it matter now? He simply had to admit his failings to Uncle Harry and move on, united once again, the good of the family placed before his selfish misgivings.

* * * *

Two days on – another dawn in another town – spring had started to unfurl in the birdsong and the fresh, sharp greens of trees doused with blossom. The year's pattern of fairs, among which Shrewsbury was one of the earliest, had begun and brought with it the chance for families to meet, trade, and gossip. The men would flash their horses up and down the field to show off their paces, sit children with sticky faces on the animals' broad, hairy backs, and hope to get the price they wanted.

Gwyn gave little thought to it, instead waiting for the night and the likelihood of a good game in the pub. He passed the day helping Matthew with the knife cart, pushing the barrow down the narrow cobbled streets – the same here as every other damned town – and charming custom out of shrewish little housewives whose shrunken cheeks turned pink at each flash of his handsome eyes and rakish smile. It made for a living.

When they finally got back to camp, the children were playing under their grandmother's watchful eye, while Aunt Maggie cleaned her collection of fine china figurines. Alone among her possessions for having no use besides decoration, Maggie's china was a source of great pride and, once they got to Shrewsbury, she would waste no time in searching for the newest, most elaborate addition she could find. A rosy-frocked shepherdess, perhaps, decked with porcelain curls and ribbons. Gwyn didn't see the attraction, and he tried to excuse himself, mind already on his first pint of the day.

His grandmother looked up from her indulgent supervision of the children, mouth twisted in disapproval.

"Early tonight, boy. You'll not be getting yourself into trouble, will you?"

"Course not, Gran."

"Hm. Mattie, would you go with him?"

Gwyn glanced at Uncle Matthew, surprised. "What? I don't need –"

Matthew tore his gaze from the wagon, where Maggie stood beside the steps, rubbing a china donkey with a strip of good cotton, torn, by the look of it, from one of her best petticoats. He blew out a long breath.

"I could keep a watch on him, Mother. Just to make sure he comes to no harm, mind. Gwyn's old enough to take care of himself."

The old woman smiled, and Gwyn knew it would be pointless to argue.

An hour later, he and Matthew made their way down to the King's Head Inn. Just like every other pub, every other town, every other night, the same shadows lengthened out into the coming dark, the same warm glow of gas-lights, and the same genial hubbub. Gwyn could even identify the same men leaning up against the bar. Oh, they were different individuals, but the types remained constant. Wiry-whiskered old men with silver hair and bright blue eyes, hefty lads with slow wits and fat, red cheeks, and rafts of working men, weighted down with the dust and fatigue of their weeks. Over by the door, stood the spitting image of the butcher's apprentice from the last village and – at a table beneath a set of hanging horse brasses – a man who could have been the blacksmith's brother. Gwyn smiled to himself, finding

something comforting about all this familiarity, and then followed Matthew to the bar.

The evening wore on, and the distrustful air with which they'd first been greeted—as always—warmed to amiable tolerance, if not acceptance. Gwyn's challenge of a card game brought hoots of laughter and a few cocky souls who thought they could take him. Three hands on, the mood had grown fiercer, with half the pub cheering on the local boys, and the other half taking bets on the outcome.

"Two pair," Gwyn declared and reached for the pot.

His opponents, thoroughly trounced, tossed down their hands in disgust, and Gwyn caught Matthew's eye across the bar. He grinned.

"Now then, lads...why don't I give you a chance to win something back, eh? No goin' home to the missus with empty pockets tonight!"

Matthew didn't look pleased, but Gwyn ignored him, too comfortably settled into his stride. He knew his element, and he knew just how far he could push it. And, while the cards stayed hot and he stayed lucky, what harm could there possibly be in that?

"I'll play you, boy."

The voice seemed to come from the heart of the crowd of assembled drinkers, and yet also right at Gwyn's elbow. He almost turned in his seat, expecting to find the speaker there, and the uncertainty wavered for a second in his voice. "Who's that, then?"

A man stepped forward; not one Gwyn had seen in here when they arrived, and he would have noticed him, that was certain. Tall, his broad shoulders covered by a long, dark green cloak, fastened with a silver ring, though his body tapered, slim in the waist and hips. He was built like a rich man, formed by sport and leisure rather than labour and graft, and he dressed like nothing Gwyn had ever seen. In addition to the green cloak, a green shirt and waistcoat matched his green breeches, the waistcoat embroidered with a motif of birds and vines, picked out in darker thread over a light green ground.

His chestnut hair hung just below his ears, and his dark skin—an olive tone that spoke of foreign climes—looked ill-shaven. Yet his appearance shook Gwyn right to his core, flooding every nerve with the awareness of his beauty. A man not just truly handsome, but...sensuous? Yes. The way he moved to the table and pulled out a chair vacated by another player convinced Gwyn of that. He swallowed hard. The stranger had not yet once withdrawn his gaze from Gwyn's, and his eyes were dark enough to eat up the world.

"Deal the cards, boy. If you'll play me?"

Gwyn did as he was told, vaguely aware of Matthew shaking his head, but not quite sure why. After all, whatever could be wrong with this?

He dealt, and they set to the game. For the first time in months, luck didn't appear to be on Gwyn's side. The cards were against him, but the stranger kept drawing pure gold. Gwyn lost heavily, to the delight of the pub crowd,

and the losing he could have taken...but the stranger started handing the money back to the men who'd lost it in the first place.

"Hey!" Gwyn wiped the sweat from his upper lip. "You go giving it all away. Aren't I to have a chance at winning it back, eh?"

The Green Man smiled. "Well, what have you left to wager, boy?"

Matthew, sitting beside Gwyn on a hard wooden stool, tugged at his elbow. "Gwyn, come along. Leave it be. We should get home."

"No!" Gwyn snapped, still staring at the man, wracking his brain for a suitable bet. "Give me a minute, can't you?"

The stranger's beautiful mouth curled even tighter at its perfect corners.

"Ah, a minute. What is a minute? An hour? A day, a week, a month, or a year? How about your soul, boy?"

He said it so low that Gwyn wondered if anyone else had heard. Maybe *he* hadn't heard right, either. He shook his head – so hard to think, all of a sudden, so foggy and out of sorts – and blinked at the mug of ale beside him. Gwyn didn't remember drinking enough to feel this drunk. He took another draught, just to be sure he could still do it.

"All right," he said. "Fine."

In any case, what did it matter? It was a meaningless bet, a piece of nonsense, and the barter itself would be worthless. What soul did he have, here in this miserable tavern, his endless routine a weary retread of the same constants, the same hopeless attempts to find significance in a life where none existed? What soul did he *deserve* to have, after he'd let Jack go and ceased his searching?

The Green Man slapped his palm against the tabletop. "Then we're agreed! Wonderful. Deal, boy."

Gwyn dealt the cards.

At first, his luck seemed on the climb, but it didn't last. Card after card, his hand got worse, yet he couldn't find the sense to fold. Before he knew it, Gwyn had lost and the whole pub was cheering and clapping, delighted to see him knocked back a few pegs. The Green Man played to the crowd, laughing and joking with them, and then he bought drinks and shook Gwyn by the hand. His touch was warm and mesmeric, and as he smiled his hypnotic smile, he drew close to Gwyn's ear and whispered: "What's yours to give is now mine to take, boy, but I'm not an unfair man. Come to my home and ask, and I shall relinquish my prize. If you don't, then in a year and a day I shall return, and I'll take what's mine. Take it and keep it. D'you understand? If you come not within a year and a day, your soul is mine."

The words seemed to come from some far-off place, but they vibrated right down to the pit of Gwyn's gut. He blinked, slowly realizing no one else appeared to have heard what the Green Man had said to him. All the laughing, smiling faces took on an edge of contorted mockery, and Gwyn wanted to turn and run. He grew aware of Matthew's hand on his sleeve, dragging him out toward the door.

Gwyn sucked in a breath of relief as the chilly night air hit his face, but a moment later the flat of his uncle's hand replaced that pleasant coolness, a ringing slap that sent him reeling back against the pub wall.

"Idiot boy! What have you done?"

Gwyn rubbed the spreading soreness on his cheekbone and tasted the bitter metal of blood in his mouth. Matthew's eyes flared in the dark, and any protestations of innocence seemed useless.

"It don't mean anything," he murmured, cringing as Matthew moved to strike him again.

"Don't mean...? You fool, Gwyn!" Matthew snarled, his hand clenching on the empty air. "Wagers like that are not to be made, boy. Not to be made! Come. We'll see what Mother has to say of this."

With that, he grabbed Gwyn's jerkin and hauled him roughly homeward.

* * * *

As Matthew had predicted, Gwyn's grandmother was far from pleased. He recounted how the bet had been made and gave her a description of the Green Man. All the while, Gwyn stood and looked at his feet. After Matthew had finished, still bristling with indignation, she waved him away and sat with Gwyn before the fire. The light danced on her worn brown face, and her mouth set tight, an impenetrable little line of silent fury.

"Do you know what you've done?"

He nodded and stared at the ground, unwilling to meet her gaze.

"Then the only thing to do," the old woman said, reaching into the pouch she wore at her hip, "is to bide by what he asks. Go there, and beg. You understand?"

Gwyn pressed his lips together, struggling to hold back the tears he didn't dare shed in front of her.

"Where? I don't know how to find it, or even what his name —"

"Just be quiet, boy. Quiet, and let me think."

She drew her hand back out of the pouch and threw something onto the fire. Gwyn guessed it was salt, because the flames flared blue for a moment and spat fat sparks. Neither of them spoke for a while, her staring into the fire and him holding his breath, frightened to look into its depths.

After what felt like hours, his grandmother shifted in her seat and took a deep breath.

"You'll leave in the morning. Mattie will lend you his spotted horse. You ride west, you hear me? No other way but that."

Gwyn nodded dumbly and, by the crackle of the fire, listened as the old woman explained what he had to do.

He passed the last night among those who loved him in sleepless fear, never believing the morning would actually come. Yet it did. Reluctantly, Gwyn rose while the sun still slumbered, and found Matthew's spotted mare already tacked up and the children waiting to kiss him goodbye.

He set off at first light, with the chill, damp traces of the night misting around the horse's feet, and he headed due west. He kept going, even when the road grew bleak and there appeared to be no end in sight to the journey, though Gwyn didn't know what he sought, and wasn't convinced it was even real. His doubts continued to grow for, after almost a week's travel in dense downpours, cold winds, and ever-present thick, sucking mud, he still seemed no nearer any kind of answer. Yet, half-frozen, worn and disheartened, Gwyn went on west as his grandmother had told him.

At the end of the seventh day, the dusk drew in around him, clammy with the threat of rain. His uncle's horse began to drag its feet, chary of going on into the dark. Gwyn leaned forward to pat the beast's neck, readying to make his camp for the night, and spied a small shack ahead at the side of the road. Thinking that it must either be abandoned—it was surely overgrown enough—or that the owner might look kindly on an exhausted wanderer, Gwyn slid off the horse's back and walked his mount up to the narrow gate.

"Hey!" he called, peering about for any sign of life. "Is there anyone here?"

"What do you want?" snapped a shrill, ancient voice.

Gwyn almost started out of his skin. He reached up a palm to quiet his anxious horse and looked for who had spoken. An old woman stood in the middle of the path, though he could have sworn she'd not been there a moment before. Gwyn cleared his throat. "Uh, good evening. I'm...that is, I wonder if you might spare—"

"A bed you're wanting, is it? Bed and a good meal?" She shuffled closer, squinting at him through rheumy eyes. Gwyn fought down the urge to laugh at the sight of her squat frame, bandy little legs, and wild gray hair. Her pudgy features rolled into a toothless smile. "You look half-starved and bedraggled, boy. Come along. You can put your horse in the stable, through there to the back of the house."

Gwyn did as she told him and found a small but comfortable pair of stalls, one already occupied by a pretty little chestnut mare. He washed his hands and face in a pitcher by the cottage door, then went inside.

The old woman was hospitality itself, though Gwyn helped her with the fire and the food. They ate, and she asked him where he headed and what his business might be on this road. He told her his story, and she nodded thoughtfully.

"A Green Man, you say?"

"Aye. Do you know where I might find his home?"

The old woman appeared to consider this for a minute. Between them, the fire crackled in the grate.

"No. But, good to me as you've been, I shall ask a third of the world where you can find him."

Puzzled, Gwyn just smiled, thanked her, and finished his meal. After they had eaten, the old woman laid him a pallet by the fire, and Gwyn settled down to sleep. Late in the night, the coming dawn already diluting the darkness, a noise woke him. Gwyn rose from his bed and crept to the

cottage's little window. Outside in the misty gloom, the old woman stood among the brambles and weeds, and about her thronged more animals than Gwyn had ever seen. Deer, badgers, mice, foxes...every kind of four-footed beast, and they all seemed to gaze at her in intense concentration. Then, abruptly, the old woman clapped her hands.

"Ah! You're no use at all," she cried. "Go on! Be off with you!"

And, with barely a rustle of the bushes, her strange menagerie turned and went. Gwyn padded back to his pallet, cold and uneasy, pulled the blanket around him, and waited for the dawn.

When it finally came, the old woman brought him tea and told him a third of the world did not know where or how to find the Green Man.

"But," she said, "You must go to my sister's house. She may be able to help you. Take my horse, for yours is tired and needs to rest, and take also this ball of twine."

Gwyn frowned at the string she pushed into his unresisting hands.

"As you set off along the road, do nothing. Touch nothing. Just throw the ball of twine between the horse's ears. Whichever direction it falls, that is the way you must head. Good luck to you."

After breakfast, Gwyn did as she directed. He mounted the chestnut mare and, with the twine in his hand, set off. He threw the ball, pointed the horse's head after it, and rode on. Hour after hour passed, then day after day. Again, Gwyn grew weary, cold and hungry, his meagre supplies running thin and his makeshift camps barely enough to sustain him. Several nights he dreamed of being home, safe and warm with Jack beside him, the way things had once been. Each time, he woke alone and unsettled, sure of something rustling in the trees.

As before, Gwyn grew close to giving up hope, and then he came across a tiny shack half-hidden at the side of the road. An old woman very like the first—small and bandy-legged with a great mass of frizzy gray hair—came out to greet him.

"It is a long time since I last saw my sister's horse," she said. "Come. Stable the mare, then draw some water from the spring, and we shall have a drink together."

Gwyn did as she asked. Behind the cottage ran a wide, deep brook, clear as glass. The old woman made tea and offered him food and shelter. In turn, Gwyn told her his tale.

"This is indeed a trial." She nodded her grizzled old head as she ate the stew she'd prepared them. "And I know nothing of this Green Man. But you're a good lad, I can see, and I shall ask a third of the world to help you."

That night, as before, Gwyn lay down to sleep. Half-broken dreams whispered across his mind, and he woke in the moonlight to what he thought was the touch of feathers on his face. Softly, he stole to the window and peered out. The old woman stood on the bank of the brook, her arms outstretched. Around her jumped fish of every kind...perch, bream, trout, and carp, and plenty more besides, their silvery bodies glimmering in the light.

"Begone, wretches!" The old woman clapped her hands. "You are no use to me if you know nothing." She pulled her shawl around her and started back toward the house.

The morning came, and all was as it had been before. Gwyn received a fresh horse and a ball of twine, with instructions to follow where it fell. He nodded obediently and set off, wondering if his whole life from now on would be spent in endless traverse from hag to hag, wrapped up with twine and madness.

This journey seemed the hardest yet. Months had passed since Gwyn first left, and the weather grew ever colder, the mud ever thicker. He thought with bitter sorrow of his family, of all the regrets he harboured, and even of Jack. Perhaps, Gwyn thought, if there was an afterlife as the Bible told it he shouldn't find it so hard to die, if they might be reunited by it. Those thoughts had begun to get the better of Gwyn by the time he reached the third cottage.

The third old woman—whom it came as no surprise to him to see—met him at her gate and, dismounting, Gwyn stumbled and fell. Barely able to stand, he leaned upon her wizened frame, grateful for the kindness with which she brought him indoors and sat him by her fire. She fed him hot soup and barley, and gradually Gwyn grew strong enough to talk. He told her about the Green Man, about how he'd met with her two sisters, and how two thirds of the world could not help him and, as his story ended, tears marked his cheeks. The old woman leaned forward and squeezed his hand.

"Sit up with me tonight," she said, "and we'll see what the rest have to say."

That night, they sat together by the back door of her cottage—a desolate little shack, with hardly even a tree around for miles—and waited.

Close to midnight, Gwyn thought he might fall asleep, but a strange noise caught his ear. He looked up and saw, one by one, birds begin to drop down from the heavens. Chaffinches, sparrows, eagles, owls, and herons all came, flapping about them in beautiful chaos, filling the air with the sound of their beating wings. Finally, they left, the endless flurry of feathers lifting like some kind of storm, and the old woman shook her head.

"I'm sorry, boy. It's no use. None knows where to find the Green Man."

Gwyn looked down at his lap, unexpected tears stinging his eyes. That was it, then. His last chance for hope, for salvation, all gone. Then, he noticed something fall from the sky. It spiralled down like a snowflake: a single white feather. He glanced up and saw a swan outlined perfectly against the full moon.

The old woman seized the feather and stared closely at it. A broad smile crept over her face.

"I have it!" she cried. "He dwells on the other side of the lake, boy. You must take this feather and ride there. I shall give you a horse. Then look deep into the water and you will find your way to the castle of the Green Man. More help than that I cannot give you, but it may be enough."

Gwyn thanked her and took the feather. He looked up, hoping to see the swan again, but it had gone.

* * * *

Morning came, and Gwyn did what the old woman told him. He saddled up her horse and headed for the lake, trekking through mile after mile of faceless country. After what seemed more like days than hours, the horse brought Gwyn to the shore of a wide, peaceful lake fringed with trees.

Gwyn slipped down and walked to the edge of the lake. He let the cool, clear water lap at the toes of his boots as the silence washed around him. Yet, however beautiful it all was, he saw nothing that resembled a castle, nor any road or track that led on from here. The water just stretched out before him, perfectly flat and still, silvered like the face of a mirror. This place could just as easily have been the end of the whole world.

Gwyn leaned forward, expecting to see his reflection in the water, but what greeted him was something entirely different. Sky, yes, and trees... a duplicate of the landscape above the lake, but not echoed straight back from reality. Rather, it seemed like a picture, a scene hidden behind a frame, displayed and yet set apart from human eyes. The longer Gwyn stared, the more it seemed he could walk straight into the other world.

Acting on instinct, he drew the swan's feather from his pocket and touched its white tip to the water. The world shimmered around him and, for a strange, ethereal moment, Gwyn felt as if he'd moved, or perhaps as if the whole of the Earth had shifted on its axis. He couldn't tell which, but he found himself standing in a woodland clearing, all verdant green like finest velvet. Trees stood on all sides, tall and proud, reaching up to a cloudless blue sky from which sunlight poured down on Gwyn, lucid and glittering. He gazed up in wonder, curious as to why he couldn't see the underside of the lake—had he gone through water, or just dreamed that he had?

Either way, there didn't appear to be time to question it. Clouds were gathering...or what Gwyn first took to be clouds. The sky darkened, and he made out the shapes of birds against the blue. They descended rapidly, dropping like stones around him, pressing in on Gwyn in a flurried crowd of feathers, their broad wings stirring up the warm, fetid air. He flung his arms over his head, frightened by the oppressiveness of their strength, the softness of down magnified to a dull roar, beating and beating all around him. It would have scared him less to hear them call out, but they didn't. And then it was quiet.

Gwyn stayed balled up on the ground, hearing nothing but his own ragged breathing. He felt no more wings, no more rushes of air, and finally mustered the courage to peer through his hands. A large swan stood in front of him, its wings half-folded and its head tipped to the side. It regarded him with a look of intense... what? Compassion? Intelligence? Surely an expression of which no bird should be capable.

Gwyn moved slowly from his crouched position, but the swan started away and hissed. Its fellows—all great, fine white birds just like this one—drew back to line the edges of the clearing, shifted uneasily, and Gwyn knew

they had the advantage of him. They could mob him at any moment, should they choose, and he'd not survive it. He held out his hand, a tentative offering of peace.

"Now, then...pretty bird. I'll not harm you."

Dusk was drawing in, the night-time shadows bending the shapes of trees and bushes and shooting the dying flares of sunlight through with gold. The swan stretched up its neck, threw out its wings, and began to change. It seemed to ripple before Gwyn's eyes, feathers shivering from head to toe and just peeling away, its old form revealed like the turning of a page. What had been white became pink, while the yellow of a beak flattened and darkened, sinking down to turn to hair. Finally, the young man lowered his head to look Gwyn in the face.

Perfectly naked, he stood in the shadow of the forest as beautiful as any dream, a few white feathers scattered about his feet. Long limbs, black hair, brown eyes, and a bruised rose of a mouth. A choked sob of disbelief broke from Gwyn's throat.

"Jack?"

"Gwyn." His voice came out husky, as if he'd had no use for speaking in a long while. "Oh, Lord...*Gwyn*?"

He stood there, rooted to the spot, those almond-shaped eyes misting with tears, yet Gwyn couldn't bring himself to move either. He wanted so badly to reach for this vision, this fantasy, and prove whether it could be real.

"Aye, Jack," he heard himself say. "It's me."

The words seemed to break some kind of thrall, because they both dived at each other then, laughter and tears entwined. Gwyn's arms were full of Jack – wonderful, perfect Jack, who was neither dead nor had abandoned him – and his hands skimmed over endless planes of familiar skin. His fingers buried in that thick, dark hair, Gwyn claimed Jack's mouth the way he'd never dared before, full-blooded and possessive, his hunger insatiable.

"I never thought you'd come," Jack murmured against his lips, body cleaving tightly to Gwyn's. "I hoped – I always prayed I'd see you again – but I never thought.... I didn't forget you, love. Not ever."

"Nor I. God, Jack! I wanted them to look, to keep on looking. I tried to make 'em, but they wouldn't. Harry, and the others, they all said you were gone. I begged, but...there was nothing to find. How –"

"Shh." Jack leaned his forehead on Gwyn's temple, one hand tilting his jaw so he could see the rest of the clearing. "See? We're not alone. There's many here had the same fate as me. He takes us, either by trick or by challenge."

Gwyn stared into the darkening brush. Where the swans had stood, there were now scores of young men, each handsome, naked, and touched by a deep sadness. Gwyn held Jack to him tighter, unnerved but unashamed.

"You see?" Jack's breath grazed his ear. "Oh, Gwyn... no. You're here to free us, aren't you? Not for the challenge?"

"He preys on gamblers," said another voice. A blond man stepped forward, thickset and ruddy-cheeked, with sharp green eyes. "He bets your

life – your very soul – and then he takes it. No one’s ever made it this close to the castle before.”

Gwyn frowned. “Then you’re all here because you lost wagers?”

“No.” Jack shook his head. “Some of us, he just *takes*.”

Gwyn wanted to question further, but another of the swan-princes called out an alarm.

“He’s coming! He’s coming!”

Jack squeezed Gwyn’s hand, his eyes widening in terror. “You must run! Run, Jack! North, and don’t stop ’til you reach the castle. You’ll know it once you see it. Don’t tell him you’ve seen us, and don’t eat or drink anything he offers. Anything! Go!”

Gwyn ran, brambles tearing at his legs and the unfamiliar shadows beating at him worse than the wings of a hundred swans. His head swam with the madness of it all...yet Jack was alive, and somehow it all ceased to matter beyond that. His Jack. The taste of him still lingered on Gwyn’s mouth. He stopped running once he’d passed the path, thankful for the safety of more trees, just in time to hear a horse canter into the clearing. Gwyn couldn’t resist looking, so he pressed his body up against the twisted trunk of an old oak and, safely hidden from view, peered back the way he’d come.

The Green Man was different here to how he’d been before. Still an imposing figure – and a handsome man – but so much stranger. He wore the same clothes of green, and the tack on his horse hung heavy with green brocade and dyed leather, but his hair and beard were longer and, Gwyn swore, green in colour. Even his skin, and the hide of his horse, seemed to have a trace of that same viridian hue.

He halted his shaggy green mount in the middle of the clearing, its massive hooves raising divots of grass. The swan-princes cowered, some taking again their bird-like forms, and others trying to cover their nakedness. Among them, only Jack stood firm. Gwyn’s chest ached with the desire to go to him, to stand together against a common enemy. He knew he mustn’t, that revealing his presence could only bring grief to them all, so he gripped the tree trunk harder, until blood oozed from his grazed fingers.

Through the softening dusk, Gwyn watched the Green Man dismount and cross the clearing to where Jack stood. He reached out and took hold of the back of his head, each movement slow and deliberate. He wrenched Jack’s neck back, holding him at a disadvantage while he pressed an ugly, open-mouthed kiss to his lips. Bile rose in Gwyn’s throat, and he barely dared breathe for fear of shouting out, for drawing the knife he wore at his belt and rushing in to cut the Green Man’s head from his shoulders with the sheer edge of his fury. He knew he mustn’t, however badly he wanted to see that ghastly face bleed. Gwyn shut his eyes, unable to look any longer.

He ventured to open them at the sound of hoof beats on the ground and the rustle of wings against the trees. The Green Man and his captives had departed, leaving behind nothing but feathers. Gwyn gathered those that had fallen where Jack stood and pressed them to his face, trying to detect some last hint of his warmth, his scent.

The Green Man

* * * *

Finding the castle was easy enough. He headed north, as Jack had said, and within the hour came upon it. It rose from its surroundings like the stem of a single flower; graceful yet improbable, supporting too much beauty grown from the mud at its feet. The carved stone doors swung open unaided, light as air on hidden hinges, and Gwyn stepped inside.

He followed a corridor of pale marble until it opened out into a great hall, the walls decked out with silks and petals all upon the floor. There the Green Man received him. He sat on a throne of living greenwood and clapped his hands in a slow, sardonic rhythm.

"Well met! Well met, indeed. Gwyn, you have come. Do you claim back what I won from you, boy?"

Gwyn stared at that smug, maleficent face, and his body tightened, demanding all his willpower to keep from flying at the man. He fought to hold his nerve, his voice raw with the strain of it, anger bouncing back in every echo.

"Aye, I do. And more besides. You have taken too much, my lord, from too many. I'll end it if I can."

The Green Man laughed, a mellow boom of a sound, and rocked in his throne. He seemed more a part of it than ever now, his hair and beard tangled up with the branches.

"You have seen my pets, yes?"

"They are *men*, lord, not —"

"They are *mine*!" the Green Man snapped, rage rising faster than sap and all traces of amusement gone from his face. "Or have you forgotten the rules of the wager?"

Gwyn frowned at the glossy marble beneath his feet. "Then trade," he murmured. "Soul for soul? My freedom for...for Jack."

The silence welled up so thick he thought it would burst, but then the Green Man laughed again. Gwyn glared, full of hatred marred with a terrible, desolate hope. If he could save Jack, it would be worth it, wouldn't it?

Worth anything.

The Green Man leaned forward in his wildwood throne and steepled fingers that seemed to Gwyn to be more like twigs than any he'd ever seen.

"I will set you a task," the Green man said. "A little bet, perhaps. Win, and you'll have what you choose. Lose, and our original wager will still stand. Do you agree?"

Gwyn nodded. "Yes."

"Good. Then come with me, boy."

He rose from his throne and came towards Gwyn, taller and broader than he'd been before, one arm outstretched in a gesture of absurdly incongruous hospitality. Gwyn did his best to stay civil, and he followed the Green Man through the marble halls, all the while wondering where he kept what he called his pets. They must be here somewhere, captive and afraid, with Jack

amongst them. Half-baked plans of rescue and futile heroics dashed through Gwyn's head, and he struggled to concentrate on what the Green Man told him.

"This palace has a thousand rooms," he declared as they reached a wide, domed hall, alabaster stairs rising at each quarter. On the great circle of the floor, mosaic tiles picked out great maps of fantastic places, continents, and seas the like of which Gwyn had never imagined. "You may pass the night in any of them, but choose wisely."

Gwyn frowned, puzzling over the Green Man's meaning. He looked up around the hall, wide as the whole world, and saw door after door awaiting him, each more beautifully carved and inlaid than the last. He sniffed.

"I don't s'pose I could just do the trial now, could I?"

The Green Man's laughter echoed back off the mosaics like the falling of a million trees.

"Come now! Let it be said that I am a hospitable host, Gwyn. Choose, and be comfortable and rested after your journey."

Gwyn reached a hand into his pocket and squeezed the feathers he'd collected from the clearing. His gaze lit on the door right at the top of the furthest rise of stairs. Just a simple frame, low and of dark wood, not unlike the door to his wagon through which he climbed every night.

"That one," he said.

The Green Man seemed displeased and offered him a choice of nearer, prettier portals, flanked with columns and porticos. Gwyn shook his head, his decision final.

"Hmm. Then will you take some supper? I beg you," The Green Man entreated. "Let it not be said I starve my guests."

"No, thank you." Gwyn's fingers itched to throttle the creature, though he knew it was a fight he'd be sure to lose. "I fed well before I came here. I shall take my ease, then, in the morning, take what challenge you set me, sir."

He climbed the stairs and made his way to the little door. Inside lay a small room with a narrow bed and one single window with bars across it, that looked out towards the forest. A full moon, risen high over the trees, cast a pale light across the curtain of the night sky. It silvered Gwyn's vision as he lay on the bed and waited though he doubted sleep would come.

"Gwyn?"

He must have slept, for his eyes flew open in the dark. Gwyn sat up, wishing the moon still illuminated his little room. He groped beside the bed for a candle before realizing he wasn't at home.

"Jack?"

A familiar hand touched his arm, and the mattress creaked in receipt of a body Gwyn could still not believe he'd found again. He reached out blindly.

"I can't see you. Can there be light? A candle, or...."

"Shh. I mustn't stay. And you mustn't say I've been here. D'you understand?"

The stifling shadows parted enough for Gwyn to feel Jack against him, the curve of his chest and his broad shoulders...the warmth of his breath against

Gwyn's cheek. He smelled of oceans and long-lost days, firelight and fresh straw. His lips brushed across Gwyn's — too fast, so soon missed — and the need burned between them in every taut breath.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes. Fine. Not a word."

Gwyn pulled him closer, wanting to draw in every detail, every inch, before he could lose him again. Jack kissed him slow and deep, the hardness of his body dragging responses from Gwyn painful in their intensity. He wondered briefly if this could be some trick of his host's, some cruel spite to break him. After all, had he chosen another of the rooms the Green Man offered, Gwyn supposed any one of his pets might have been sent to tempt him in the night.

Yet, for all the threat of illusion and sorcery, nothing had ever seemed more real than Jack, held tight against him. He ceased to care whether it was real or not...just that it stayed true enough to believe in. Gwyn buried his face in Jack's neck and murmured his love a dozen times or more, his words caught up in Jack's urgent, answering whispers. His hands shook as they sought the body he remembered, all that firm, proud flesh, warm and beautiful.

The bed groaned beneath them and, for a moment, Gwyn wondered what would happen should they be caught, but the thought soon paled into insignificance. Jack's body shivered against his, tip to toe a mirror of his own, aching and tense. Promises scattered in the dark between them — neither would ever leave the other again, nor let a moment's sorrow scar their love. Bliss seared him clean through, lost to everything but the feel of Jack's embrace.

Afterwards, when the thick quiet of the night began to seem cold and full, Jack's voice came small and soft out of the silent dark. "Gwyn? You still awake?"

Gwyn smiled. "How could I sleep with you beside me, you daft man?"

"Daft yourself," Jack retorted, jabbing his toe into Gwyn's ankle.

"Ow!"

"No, listen. Two things."

"Anything," Gwyn promised him, pressing closer beneath the blankets.

"In the morning, he'll come for you. The Green Man. He'll take you up to the top of the tower, and he'll ask you to choose your prize. The birds will fly over, and you must choose the same one three times in a row. Look for the swan that is missing feathers from its left wing. You understand? Left. Each time. All right?"

"Left wing," Gwyn echoed, not fully understanding. "Yes, all right."

"Good."

"What's the second thing?"

Jack sighed. "Just this: that I'm sorry I hurt you, Gwyn. Before I left...that girl? Harry's daughter?"

Gwyn's stomach tightened. "It doesn't matter," he lied.

"No, listen. It was never what you thought. She'd met a boy in one of the villages, and she was scared to tell her father because he wasn't our kind. You know how Harry is. I tried to give her comfort, that's all. If people thought.... Well, you know the way the women are."

"Oh." For the first time, Gwyn felt grateful for the darkness. It hid the burning flames of his embarrassment.

"You see?"

"Right. Yes. So...."

"So you mustn't doubt, Gwyn. No more. Ever."

Jack kissed his cheek, and Gwyn was sure he must have felt the heat of it, the waves of humiliation staining his skin. How bitterly they'd fought, and over nothing! He curled into Jack's body and held on, feeling small, useless and infantile. Jack stroked the back of his head, and Gwyn drifted into the easiest sleep he'd had since his journey began.

When he awoke, he was alone and his knife and tinderbox had gone. He swore but had little time to investigate, for the Green Man knocked at the chamber door and bid him come to the top of the tower for his challenge to begin.

The castle's tower rose so high Gwyn feared the air might grow thin; with the morning light spilling across the trees and glades below, he could see all the way across what he supposed must be the Green Man's kingdom. It stretched out far enough, though there was something of a painting about it, that odd perspective he'd first noticed in the lake. He wondered just how real any of this had been. Thoughts of the night before – of Jack's scent still on his skin – threatened to push their way to the forefront of Gwyn's mind, but he resisted and focused on the task in hand.

They stood on the flat white stones that paved the tower's top, rough crenellations running all around them. The Green Man, clad in a loose robe that seemed part green velvet and part the very fabric of deep summer leaves, raised his arm and gestured to the azure sky.

"You see up there, boy? Watch closely. My pets shall fly across before us and – if you would free the soul of the one you ask for – you must choose him three times. Three times, without fail, mark you. Succeed, and I shall let both of you go. Choose wrongly, and I will take what you wagered me and keep what I have already won. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Gwyn nodded grimly. "I do, and I accept your challenge."

"Very well."

The Green Man smiled, then clapped his hands. Gwyn heard the rustle of wings, like a flock of angels taking flight, and stared at the sky so hard his eyes ached. In his pocket, his fingers closed around the swan feathers he still carried. He could do it, he knew. He must do it.

The swans arced up in line with the tower, each magnificent bird pure white, perfect silhouettes beating against the endless blue. The bright sunlight and their overlapping shapes blurred the differences between them, and Gwyn strained to make them out. Jack's words came back to him – *left wing; feathers from the left wing* – and he squinted harder.

There, at the back of the flock, he saw Jack. A swan with feathers missing from the outer edge of its left wing. He pointed and cried out, and the Green Man snarled with anger. The birds wheeled back, dropping beneath his line of sight before coming back for their second pass. This time they came from the other direction, and Gwyn couldn't make out Jack, nor his marked wing.

Then, in the middle of the group, he saw one bird clutching something in its feet. He shaded his eyes with his hand and saw the shape of his tinderbox.

"Ha! That one, my lord! I see him."

Again, the Green Man growled, but could do nothing. He lurched forward, gripped the edge of the stonework with his green-hued hands and mumbled bitter words under his breath.

The birds returned for their third pass, and Gwyn's new-found confidence faltered. Where was Jack? He saw no swan with missing feathers, no tinderbox, just a mass of white wings beating together. The Green Man smiled, and Gwyn felt sure he'd played some underhand trick. He darted from one side of the tower to the other, unable to find what he sought, and the swans wheeled on, to and fro about them.

"What's the matter, boy?" the Green Man boomed. "Make your choice!"

"I...I can't see," Gwyn murmured. "I can't...."

At that moment, one bird burst from the middle of the flock, its breast stained bright crimson. Gwyn's knife fell from its beak and spiralled down towards the trees while the other swans broke in confusion, their awkward calls tarnishing the air.

"Jack!" Gwyn cried, horrified to see him falter in his flight, and terrified that he would fall.

The Green Man gave a great howl of fury, his hands cracking the stonework beneath them as the fingers turned to hoary roots, ripping through the masonry like butter.

Jack, swan no longer, seemed to ripple between human and bird form as he plummeted to the ground. Gwyn turned and ran back down the steps of the tower, tears of panic and terror welling in his eyes and blinding him almost as badly as visions of Jack's broken, mangled corpse lying on the ground below. He tripped as he ran, stumbling on ground that changed before he hit it.

Once more, the world seemed to shiver as it had done when Gwyn first passed through the lake and, with the feeling of being pulled up through a cloud of ice crystals, he was moving faster and faster. He screwed his eyes tight shut, his head full of thoughts of Jack and, once he dared to breathe again, he realized he was no longer where he had been.

Gwyn opened his eyes to find the tower gone. No more tall trees, no more bright blue sky or beating wings...just grass, a little damp and a little prickly, and the thick mud that edged the lake. He coughed and pushed himself up on his hands and knees. His clothes were soaked through, his hair hanging wet about his ears. Nearby, the horse he had borrowed from the third old woman grazed happily. Gwyn spat in the grass, feeling like he must have swallowed

half the lake and all the centuries of duck shit it contained, and looked about him, trying to understand what had happened.

Several feet away, he saw a figure half-submerged at the lake's edge.

Gwyn's pulse quickened and, heart pounding, he scrambled on weak and shaking legs to where the body lay, choked with mud and weed. Even before Gwyn turned him over, he knew it was Jack. He knew every line, every freckle, every inch of him...black hair sodden with foul water, skin paler than it ought to be, and lips blue with cold. His shirt was torn, his chest bleeding where he had marked himself, and Gwyn pressed his fingers to the wound, then to Jack's face, begging him to wake.

His eyes flickered, once then twice, and Gwyn helped him sit and cough up the water he'd swallowed. He pushed back Jack's hair and stroked his cheek, not wanting to stop touching him in case he vanished. Slowly, living warmth came back to his flesh, and Gwyn felt able to breathe again.

"You did all right, didn't you?" Jack said at last, his voice raw and husky with the water. "My hero."

Gwyn laughed, more from relief than amusement, and squeezed his hand.

He caught the horse, helped Jack up onto its back and, satisfied he could sit well enough to ride, pointed the animal's head homeward. Late afternoon sunshine spilled golden rays across the land, and he wondered how long – if at all – he had really been in the Green Man's kingdom. The horse was real enough, but would the old women and their cottages still be there to be passed? Gwyn had heard it said that the same road could never be travelled twice. He supposed that was why every moment, every opportunity, should be lived to the full. He looked up at Jack, slumped and exhausted aboard the horse, and patted his knee.

"Come on, you," said Gwyn. "We'll get you home."

"Will we, now?" Jack grinned weakly. "That sounds nice. Is it far?"

"Not really." Gwyn looked ahead of them into the burnished light. "I know a nice few cottages we can stop by along the way. I've got friends down this road, see?"

The horse's hooves clopped steadily on the packed dirt and, as they walked, Gwyn reached his hand into his pocket. His fingers closed around a small bundle of soft, white feathers, and he smiled broadly into the evening sun.

About the Author

M. King lives and works in a damp, verdant corner of South West England, where she may usually be found behind a keyboard and a vat of coffee. She has a deep and wide-ranging interest in folklore, and the Travellers' Tales series is inspired by her long-time affection for Romany stories.

You can find more of her work at www.lavengra.co.uk or <http://lavengra.wordpress.com>

M. King

loveyoudivine

is dedicated to bringing you the finest
erotic literature on the web.

You are cordially invited to join us on a journey of
sexual awakening and sensual passion.

Visit us on the web at: www.loveyoudivine.com

