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THE GREEN MAN OF AVINGTON
by Michael Watson

The hated Richard Puinguiant died in 1125 — the twenty-fifth year of the reign of King Henry. From Lord Richard's manor at Avington, the news was brought to Wulfgar son of Æfward son of Eafa in the depth of Selwood Forest on a hot summer day. Edith, Wulfgar's child-bride, was unforgiving.

"May he be pierced by devils' spears," she called from the gloom of their hut.

And from beyond her came the curse of her dying father who spoke the ancient tongue of the Britons.

Grey-bearded Wulfgar thanked the chapman for carrying the message; he gave him two silver pennies.

"'Pax'," the man read, examining each coin carefully.

"My coin is new-minted in Bath," Wulfgar told him. "I'll not repay kindness with trickery. Go to the alehouse and eat. Give my name: it's as good as my coin."

The traveller eyed the fugitives' humble shelter.

"What did the sick man say?" he asked.

"Eadwig is of the old religion. He invoked the Green Man to destroy Puinguiant's heirs."

"*Dona nobis pacem*," the chapman sighed, crossing himself. "Will you forest people never be at peace with the Normans?"

"When unjust men are gone, all coin is as good as mine and there's bread enough, then will the King's promises be believed by the true men of Wessex."

Edith went to Wulfgar's side, felt for his hand and squeezed it.

"This news is a beginning," she smiled.

Eadwig died three days later. His last wish was to be buried like his ancestors on Cymmerprys Eyot at Avington. Wulfgar was apprehensive.

"Even after twenty-five years there'll be men there who'll remember that our families were driven out," he objected. "We know nothing of the new lord, Edith. He could be worse than Richard. And as for burial in the old tradition, who knows the rite now that your father's gone?"

Edith, her dark eyes glistening, drew a chest from beneath her father's couch. She took out a roll.

"He taught me to read the runes," she said. "First, I must prepare his body for the journey. There are salts and herbs to collect and linen to buy." She paused and looked sorrowfully at the emaciated corpse. "And I must take blood for the rite," she added. "Find a litter and an ass. We must be in Avington for Lugnasad."

Wulfgar was yet more uneasy. Use of the forbidden word for Lammas Eve brought memories of the darkest days of his life. To be a fugitive was bad, to be a heretical fugitive worse. Was his pretty black-haired wife of less than a year — a girl born in the forest who had never entered a church — risking her soul? Yet, what if she were right and the Christian religion was the heresy? Were there any left in Avington who believed themselves protected by the Green Man?

The community mourned Eadwig for three days. Each evening, tales were told of the man who was born in the year before William of Normandy declared himself King. Of his sixty winters, thirty-five had been spent in Avington beside the River Kennet from which fish sprang and where the oak woods were full of tame porkers.

Eadwig had married the youngest daughter of Eafa the Sokeman who was born in the year King Edmund Ironside died but dispossessed by the Norman intruders. Eadwig and the girl who was to become his wife were driven from their paradise into Selwood where she bore Edith. Eafa was grandfather of both Wulfgar and Edith — the same Eafa who gave his name to that pleasant place beside the River Kennet. And on an island in that river, Cymmerprys Eyot, Eadwig must be laid to rest.

Two brash young men, attracted to slender Edith, volunteered to escort the cortège. They told Wulfgar that hiding in a forest was not a man's life.

The route from Selwood was uncertain. Wulfgar had been fifteen when they had followed the Wansdyke to the west. They had been aided by winter darkness and heavy rain — and hadn't to drag a litter behind an ass. Now, they must use subterfuge.

Several of the fugitives in Selwood had met pilgrims who were on their way to King Athelstan's abbey at Malmesbury. Not far from there, they said, was a herepath, which ran straight as an arrow to the Kennet at Speen. Others, who had visited Bath recently, advised that a new place of pilgrimage was established at Reading where the Kennet also flowed. There was a herepath route but it would be better to seek out the port ways if they were to avoid soldiers.

On the first morning of the journey, after being challenged twice, Wulfgar met a party led by a friar.

"Are you bound for Malmesbury?" he asked.

"No, my son, we mean to celebrate St Laurence' day at the new abbey at Reading which the King himself has endowed. There is a part of the gridiron with the holy saint's skin attached, also a phial of his blood. Already lepers have been cleansed. At Whitsuntide, the Holy Father was represented there by a cardinal from Crema. He promised ten days remission of enjoined penance to all pilgrims and ..."

"A new abbey?" Wulfgar interrupted.

"When finished, it will eclipse Canterbury. King Henry is yet in Normandy but work proceeds as if he were directing it himself."

"While his starving people are bullied and their money is made worthless," Edith murmured from behind the ass.

The pilgrims peered at her, wondering at her audacity.

"Surely you know that the King has punished the moneyers?" one asked Wulfgar. "They were gathered at Winchester last Christmas, emasculated and sent home lacking also their right hands as King Athelstan ordained. The Normans have made the old law their own."

The friar nodded at the litter.

"Tell me, son, why do you carry a corpse in this heat? It should be given Christian burial."

"The body is that of my father," Edith spoke up. "He asked to be buried beside his forebears."

The friar leaned forward and sniffed the air.

"The sisters prepared him for the journey," Edith lied.

"They used an unusual unguent. What is that on the air?"

"May we travel with you, Father?" Wulfgar asked hastily. "We are unsure of the road to ... " He paused, reluctant to name a place which the friar might know to be associated with the Green Man, "Hungerford," he concluded, glancing at the two young men.

The friar nodded but kept his eyes on Edith.

"I am Egbert Cordwainer of Bath," Wulfgar added. "This is Æfgifu my wife and her brothers Alfred and Edgar, cottars of Hungerford."

"A royal family indeed," the friar remarked dryly. "Of course you may travel with us. As pilgrims, we are duty-bound to escort the bier. Now, before we go on, let us pray together for a safe journey." He eyed Edith meaningfully. "Let us repeat the Paternoster."

To Wulfgar's relief, Edith fell to her knees devoutly. Satisfied, the friar conducted them to Hungerford which they reached three days before Lammas.

"No man will envy you such a home," the friar observed as they passed through a wood bordering neglected fields. "You did well to take your trade to Bath, Master Cordwainer: they have little need of shoes here."

"I have heard," a pilgrim murmured, "that this land was poisoned by witches. Last year's famine took off half of the people ..."

"Which you must know, Egbert of Bath, as well as you knew of the King's new abbey and the moneyers' fate," the friar cut in. He frowned at Edith. "We must join you at the burial. The prayers of righteous men will speed your father to Heaven."

It seemed to Wulfgar that the game was up. But rescue came from an unexpected quarter: thieves.

Their leader, seeing the friar, crossed himself and said that pilgrims were never harmed if they dropped their purses and went on their way. When Wulfgar refused to follow the friar's lead, he was attacked by three of the ruffians who in turn were set upon by the two escorts. Wulfgar was stunned by a cudgel.

He awoke in Edith's arms to find that both pilgrims and thieves had fled.

"You may thank your wife for our deliverance," one escort said coyly. "Whatever it was she invoked drove them off."

Wulfgar peered around at the rustling trees. His wife smiled down at him but said nothing.

Hungerford lived up to its name and provided only a little bad bread and gristled gammon for their money. After spending the night in the wood, they conveyed Eadwig's corpse the few miles to his birthplace.

At first, Wulfgar failed to recognise Avington. Half the houses had gone; others lacked thatch. Beside the river, where his grandfather's sequestered house had stood, arose a stone hall with glass windows and a tiled roof. But that wonder was nothing to what had happened to the ancient oaken church of St Mark. Surrounded by heaps of limestone, a new building was under construction. On the village side, stripped trunks of oak trees lay ready for the sawyer. Men with adzes shaped timber baulks; others with stone axes dressed pillar drums. The yews, planted — it was claimed — by the Green Man himself, had been cut down. And the stand of oaks close to the river had been thinned so that the silver Kennet was visible.

They stood silent, Wulfgar staring at the desecrated church — Edith scanning the village as if trying to recognise some landmark described by her father. They were oblivious of the trickle of villagers that approached to surround them.

"Surely this is Wulfgar Æfwardson returned," an old woman remarked.

The crowd began to murmur.

A flurry of activity signalled the arrival of two bailiffs.

"You must come with us," one told Wulfgar.

The new lord of the manor appeared affable. Tow-haired and beardless, he sat at a long table on a daïs in his airy hall dressed in fine woollen cloth. A document was spread between two candleholders before him; other rolls lay at his right hand.

"I am Richard Puinguiant," he announced. "I was named after my father and was born in the year of King Henry's coronation in the West Minster." He paused to look keenly at Wulfgar. "I tell you that because it was an eventful year," he added with a sly smile.

Wulfgar remained expressionless. There were two men behind the lord: one, in clerical garb was as swarthy as Wulfgar, the other was lithe, blond and sun-tanned.

"I expected to meet Egbert Cordwainer of Bath," Puinguiant remarked playfully, "but it seems that you are the son of Æfward Outlaw."

He raised a long-fingered hand to forestall enquiry.

"My holy clerk and master mason here returned from Reading last night. They met pilgrims on the road who described you. I suppose you are confident that my father's death will have changed matters. After all, it was your father — not you — who was accursed."

"Accursed?" Wulfgar echoed.

"My clerk has looked out the roll. Listen."

Richard selected a document and began to read in Latin; he paused and translated the words into English.

"*Whereas*," he concluded, "*Æfward son of Eafa the former lord of this manor has shown obduracy in this enquiry, a declaration of outlawry is made*."

He glanced at the priest who pointed an accusing finger at Wulfgar.

"Your father was a wizard. Witnesses said that on the day after Lammas in that year he consorted with devils against the late king. He conjured blood from the ground and proclaimed that the king must die. And we all know what happened that day: King William Rufus was shot to death unshriven in a magical forest glade. No mortal man was close enough to pull a bow. And we know why the king's bastard died on May Eve — or should I say the Feast of Bethane. Witchcraft was the reason. That is why the descendants of Eafa were expelled. Were you not told? And there is one other — more recent — charge: it is known that spells caused the loss of the White Ship and King Henry's heir five years ago — spells cast by wizards such as your father Æfward. Where is he?"

"My father froze to death in the Great Winter of the fifteenth year of the king's reign," Wulfgar objected. He was about to add 'as did my wife and children and the mother of my second wife' but he swallowed his words. He realised that mention of Edith might lead to further questioning. Had the pilgrims spoken of the well-preserved corpse?

Lord Richard stared hard at him as if trying to read his thoughts.

"Then I must declare Æfward not guilty on that count," he nodded — and relaxed. "But what brings you to Avington, Master Cordwainer?" he asked.

Wulfgar returned the stare of the new lord. He appeared to be a true Norman but his expression was more that of a scholar than a soldier. It seemed that his name — Puinguiant — had changed its meaning: he was sharp-witted rather than sharp of sword.

"The truth is simple. I have never known a settled life. I wish to live as a cottar here, working the land and — with God's grace — raise a family to serve the Lord. I have brought two strong and healthy young men with me who also wish to work the land. This is the home of my ancestors and their burial place. I seek reconciliation — a fresh start."

The mason whispered in the lord's ear.

"We need strong men," Richard Puinguiant reflected, "and children to continue their work." He stood up and smiled. "You have convinced me. Choose yourselves cottages and begin work on the church tomorrow," he ordered.

Wulfgar found his wife with an old woman whose hovel was on the edge of the village. Eadwig's body had been given shelter.

But Edith was angry.

"The Normans had the stone stripped from the ground," she began.

"The fane was never before treated in this way," the old woman interrupted. "Before Puinguiant came to Avington, the priests of Rome dared not desecrate a temple of the old religion."

"The new Lord Richard was responsible for his priest's act — not his father," Edith added.

"But Puinguiant seems a fair man," Wulfgar objected.

"He cut down the sacred yew trees. Let him take the consequences," the woman muttered. "He has no protection against the power of witches now."

Wulfgar frowned. Once, he had regarded Edith's enthusiasm for the old ways as the girlish humouring of an ageing parent's ramblings. But in the past year, she seemed to have acquired a crusading spirit. If too outspoken, she could bring upon herself not exile but the painful death ordained for heretics.

"Come wife," he ordered. "We must find shelter for the night. We have leave to choose a cottage."

But she shook off his arm.

"First," Edith insisted, "I must arrange for my father's burial. This cunning-woman knew him and will help. We can stay under her roof tonight. Tomorrow is Lugnasad; we will perform the rites at moonrise."

There were men, Wulfgar thought, who would beat such nonsense out of a wife but how could he strike Edith who — even at sixteen winters — looked to be little more than a child? He retreated, meaning to inspect the vacant cottages. But the Normans who had witnessed his meeting with Lord Richard blocked his path.

"You must know who we are and understand your position here," the priest said. "I am Robert Brêvedent and this is Geoffrey de Lisieux. We need craftsmen, not shoemakers — nor troublemakers. Do you have any skill in the building trades?"

"I have worked in wood," Wulfgar admitted.

"Then you must start in the saw pit." He eyed Edith who stood in the doorway. "Tell your wife — if so she be — to bring you plenty of water: in this heat you will find the work hard," he added — and walked away.

Geoffrey lingered.

"Is it true that your grandfather and his ancestors were lords here?" he asked.

"It is said that our family descended from King Centwine of Wessex before the church was built."

"Then you may be able to explain the carvings which we found beneath the old church floor. The villagers will tell me nothing. Come."

He led the way to the far side of the church and pointed at two heavy blocks. Eyes had been carved into two sides, nostrils between them and a mouth beneath. Thick curling hair completed the design.

"Do they mean anything to you?" Geoffrey asked.

Wulfgar was reluctant and the question was repeated.

"That is the Green Man," he murmured, "a figure from the old religion. He was believed to be the protector of the common people against injustice."

"Indeed," the mason replied coolly. "As it happens, there is reference to *our* old religion here. Follow me."

Geoffrey de Lisieux led Wulfgar into the new church. Above the fresh stone of the old lord's tomb, men were erecting timber centring for the chancel arch. Arch blocks lay ready, each depicting a serpent's beak gripping a roll of stone.

"At the beginning of time — it was once believed — when the old gods walked the northern lands, a serpent named Nithhog attacked the World Tree Yggdrasil ..."

"A tree!" Wulfgar interrupted.

"So here, upon the chancel arch, we have serpents gripping a branch which will cross from north to south of the church. Lord Richard saw the new cloisters at Reading and must have the same design. The beakheads depict the struggle between evil and the natural world."

Wulfgar wanted to know more about this religion which seemed to share the beliefs of Edith and her father but the mason's smile put him on guard. Had he been charged by Lord Richard to discover the attitude to witchcraft of Eafa's kin?

And then, as if he had been eavesdropping, Robert Brêvedent appeared from behind a column.

"The lord has ordered that the two stones bearing the pagan image must be destroyed," he told Wulfgar. "There are the tools; see to it."

The mason was called away. Before the priest followed, he watched Wulfgar begin work on the ancient carvings. At dusk, all that remained of them was a pile of chippings.

Exhausted, Wulfgar didn't object when his wife required him to sleep with the two escorts in the cottage they had selected. He awoke at cockcrow and, unable to settle, went to the cunning-woman's house.

A rush lamp burnt close to the bier. In the shadows, Wulfgar counted six men. Edith was instructing them in their duties. So, her husband said to himself, the old religion is still practised in Avington. He crossed himself and crept away.

The day was spent in hard work in the sawpit but it wasn't Edith who brought water. Geoffrey de Lisieux himself bore the ewer.

"I hear that your wife is in the care of the women today. Perhaps that's as well: Lord Richard expressed a desire to meet her. Like King Henry, he needs an heir. You should know that he believes Edith to be your daughter rather than your wife."

Wulfgar said nothing but took a draught from the ewer. Geoffrey continued.

"It seems that she passed a restless night and was heard groaning. Let us hope that she's strong enough to resist any temptation she might meet."

The mason's face was open and friendly. Wulfgar thanked him for his warning but felt uncomfortable.

"Richard Puinguiant doesn't entertain disappointment," Geoffrey added. "He's impetuous and has been known to strike out cruelly."

At sundown, Wulfgar went directly to his wife to warn her but again he was denied access. He had no alternative but to wait for the funeral rites to be completed.

The old burial place was in a circle of elders on an island in the river. On the side nearest the village, there was a gap in the hedge. Eadig's grave had been prepared and lined with yew branches from the fallen trees. The wrapped corpse was bound to a stretcher of oak staves made ready to lower into the ground. Wulfgar felt movement at his elbow.

"We call this grove Cymmerprys in the old tongue because it is close to where two rivers join," the cunning-woman told him. "And this river we call Cynetan — the exalted one, holiest of streams." She turned to Edith. "Are you ready?" she asked.

Wulfgar's young wife waded the stream as if in a trance. She was dressed in a white wool robe he hadn't seen before. Around her head she wore an oak leaf circlet and in her hand was a blackthorn staff which was decorated with oak leaf sprays. She faced south across the grave, towards the tinkling river on the far side. Shadowy figures ringed the enclosure. Wulfgar was conscious of village people watching from amongst the trees behind him.

"She holds the stang that her father used to bring down King William in the forest," the old woman whispered.

"I was told that my father was the man accursed," he gasped.

"Only Eadwig knew the mysteries at that time," she confirmed, "but now — we shall see. How strong she looks."

Wulfgar was urged to put a stop to the proceedings. If Lord Richard's priest discovered them, his wife would surely die in lingering agony.

But the woman held his arm fast.

Then, in a strange tongue, Edith conducted the ritual over her father's body.

"Now comes the libation prayer," the old woman whispered.

Edith took a small beaker from an attendant and, holding it high, poured its contents onto the ground at her feet.

"The blood royal, the blood of her father," Wulfgar was told.

He was horrified. He wanted to snatch up his bride as he had on his wedding day. He would bear her away squealing girlishly to a couch of rowan and tansy in a candlelit tent. Hers should be a life of light, music and laughter not dark witchcraft. But something prevented his movement and speech.

Four masked figures bent to lower Eadwig into his grave. Edith stood with her arms raised high; the stang was silhouetted against the moon.

And then came the men.

Waving flaming torches, they crashed through the wood and waded the river. Wulfgar was pinioned and dragged back. He heard Edith cry out above the shouting. His captors stopped to watch. Edith raised her arms.

"I, Queen of the Green Woods, call upon you to protect us," she screamed.

She turned and repeated the invocation — then again to the east, then to the west. The lord's men fell silent and crossed themselves, afraid to intervene.

Edith raised the stang and levelled it towards the south.

"I curse King Henry for neglecting his people. May he beget no heir."

There was a cry of rage. Richard Puinguiant rushed past and onto the island.

"You too, I curse," Edith told him. "Before Lammas sunset you will lie buried beside your father. The serpents of hell will look down on you both and laugh."

Those were her last words. With a single blow, she was beheaded. Her blood sprayed over that of her father and her corpse fell back into his grave. Richard took up her head and held it high.

"The witch is dead and gone to eternal damnation," he shouted.

His servants cheered — but then, as one man, fell silent. The rustling of trees grew louder.

Violent movement at the edge of the grove brought gasps from the villagers. The elder trees shook and hissed in the moonlight before parting to reveal what Eadwig had so often described: the Green Man.

Terrified villagers and Normans alike fled Cymmerprys Eyot. Fanning out in the wood, scrambling through the undergrowth they dropped torches and swords in their panic. But Wulfgar, his hands freed, stood petrified by what he saw.

The Green Man strode forwards, his hair waving like the branches of trees in a storm. From behind Wulfgar came the creaking and splitting of live oak. He turned to see the first of the trees crash down upon the Normans. Soon all had fallen.

The Green Man advanced to the graveside. He picked up Edith's head and took it reverently to the sacred river. It disappeared beneath the swirling water.

Wulfgar turned and ran. At the church, he found the villagers sheltering. They whimpered together until the wind dropped and the oaks raised themselves — except one — until the wood was reformed. Through the gap left, the Green Man was seen standing guard over the open grave of Edith and her father. The terrified people huddled closer.

The old woman pressed through the crowd to Wulfgar's side. In her hand was the blackthorn staff still spattered with Edith's blood.

"None of us was harmed but her," she observed. "The Green Man saw to that."

But when Wulfgar turned his eyes to the island again; he had gone.

Most spent the night in prayer. Wulfgar, exhausted, lay down upon the grass and wept for his lost wife until he fell asleep.

At dawn, the villagers collected up the crushed bodies of Puinguiant's men. Amongst them was the priest Brêvedent — but not Geoffrey de Lisieux.

"They have found Lord Richard," he told Wulfgar — and led him to the only oak which had not risen. "We'll bury him beside his father beneath the chancel arch."

Wulfgar made his way to the river bank, fell to his knees and crossed himself. Where the Green Man had stood — on the spot that Edith's lifeblood had soaked — there grew a lithe oak sapling.

"On Lugnasad," Wulfgar murmured, "she blessed the soil and made it fruitful. May she rest in peace."

"Amen to that," a quiet voice behind him said. Geoffrey looked at him keenly. "But now there is a new mystery. Did you not break the stones as you were ordered?"

The mason led Wulfgar to the church. There, they looked down in silence at the two ancient carvings; they were as if freshly made.

"None of this will be heard outside the village," Geoffrey said, taking his arm. "But it will provide a story which will be handed down for generations."

* * * *

Before Candlemas in the Year of our Lord 1129, the new church at Avington was dedicated to Saint Mark and Saint Luke, patron of healers. The new lord of the manor, Richard de Camville, was a just man known for his piety who had made his mark at Eynsham. It was on Geoffrey de Lisieux's instructions that the two images of the Green Man were used as springing points for the chancel arch.

But the work was spoiled.

Before the mason returned to the abbey at Reading, he took Wulfgar into the church and pointed up at the keystone of the arch. A crack rose towards the roof directly over the uncarved tomb slab of the younger Richard Puinguiant.

"Should you not repair it?" Wulfgar asked.

"The building is strong enough to last a thousand years," the mason assured him. "Let it remind your descendants that there are things beyond the understanding and command of mortals — even that of master masons. The Green Man will always watch over Avington."

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Author's Note: *Today, the Norman Church of St Mark and St Luke, Avington, Berkshire is the private property of the de Walden family. The carvings have survived — despite the crack — for nearly nine hundred years. According to the Courtauld Institute in London, the beakhead chancel arch may be the earliest of its type in England. It outlived its model in the Royal Abbey of Reading — which was destroyed during the Dissolution in 1539.*